Center for American Progress

Remote Learning and School Reopenings

What Worked and What Didn't

By Megan Ferren   July 6, 2021

When schools closed their doors in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a scramble to adjust to remote learning. Classes went online,[1] school meal distribution became grab-and-go,[2] and extracurricular activities and services were paused.[3] Over the summer and into the fall, the debate over reopening took center stage, as school leaders struggled to answer how and when it would be safe to return to the classroom.

The Center for American Progress has been tracking key trends during remote learning and school reopening efforts across the United States. CAP has also applied a racial equity lens to understand how different communities, educators, and students have been affected by these trends. Throughout the past year, states, school districts, and schools across the country have taken vastly different approaches to education. As districts and schools plan for the upcoming school year and life after the pandemic, these trends can help inform best practices to apply and pitfalls to avoid. It is important to note that because most decisions around responding to the pandemic and reopening schools were left to districts and schools, national, and even state-level, data are limited. As such, looking at trends and individual examples is one of the most effective ways to understand what has been happening in education during the past year.

Trend 1: School reopening

By March 25, 2020,[4] all public school buildings in the United States had closed in response to the rising threat of the coronavirus. Schools in all but two states, Wyoming and Montana,[5] remained closed through the end of the school year. Over summer 2020, every state developed reopening plans,[6] providing recommendations to districts on everything from academics and health mitigation measures to food and nutrition and school transportation. These plans resulted in a patchwork of in-person, hybrid, and fully remote education in the fall. At the start of the 2020-21 school year, four states—Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, and Texas—required in-person instruction to be available in all or some grades.[7] While many schools did reopen their doors in some capacity, 74 percent of the 100 largest school districts in the country started the year with remote-only instruction models, affecting more than 9 million students.[8]

In schools that did reopen for in-person learning, a range of health mitigation steps were implemented. In their reopening plans, 40 states recommended that districts require or recommend masks, four called for requiring masks for staff only, and seven did not provide a suggestion or cautioned against mandates.[9] An October survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that just 65 percent of middle and high school students reported their classmates wore masks all the time in the classroom.[10] Most states also recommended temperature checks and symptom screenings,[11] despite the CDC not recommending them due to inaccuracy. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has explained that temperature readings can fluctuate based on weather and will not capture asymptomatic carriers or those for whom fever is not a symptom.[12] An *Education Week* survey found that the most common safety measures being promoted were hand-washing and hand-sanitizing; requirements that sick or exposed students and staff stay home; more intensive cleaning; and mask requirements.[13] The least common measures reported were COVID-19 testing for students and staff, social distancing on school buses, prohibiting eating in cafeterias, and upgraded ventilation. The CDC recommends using these strategies when possible in its Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools recommendations.[14]

By November 2, 2020, significantly more school districts were offering some in-person instruction. Nineteen percent of districts remained fully remote, but 45 percent used hybrid models and 36 percent were fully in person.[15] The districts that were quicker to reopen were more likely to serve a majority-white student population. According to the American Enterprise Institute's Return to Learn Tracker, of "high-minority districts," defined as those that have more nonwhite 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," or those with fewer nonwhite students than the national district average.[16] This gap in access to in-person learning was, and remains, a significant barrier to instruction for students who are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), who were less likely to have access to technology and high-speed internet to effectively engage in virtual instruction.[17] Additionally, students living in poverty, who are disproportionately children of color,[18] are more likely to lack educational supports that make learning at home successful, such as a parent with a high school or college degree.[19] These students often face additional stressors such as food or housing insecurity, caregiving responsibilities for younger siblings, and lost income due to a parent's job loss,[20] all of which make remote learning more challenging. Furthermore, students with disabilities have lost access to critical health care and educational supports they received at school when learning at home.[21]

Reopening schools was not a linear path for many districts. As COVID-19 cases fluctuated in the surrounding community and outbreaks were reported in the building, schools would revert to remote learning. For some schools, reopening was short-lived. New Trier High School in Illinois, for example, was open for just five days in

the fall before reclosing due to rising cases.[22] Many schools closed after the winter break period, when cases were on the rise as a result of holiday travel. In New York City, in the four weeks following winter break, 722 schools closed for at least 10 days, with some experiencing multiple closures. Fifty-three percent of open elementary and District 75 schools in the city, which provide specialized instruction for students with disabilities, experienced closures of at least two days.[23]

As of May 3, 2021, only 1 percent of districts across the country were fully remote, 46 percent were hybrid, and 53 percent were fully open.[24] This large shift toward reopening is likely due in part to the fact that 12 states had ordered schools to reopen and two additional states had ordered at least some grades to reopen,[25] as well as the high rate of vaccination among educators.[26] While the in-person learning gap between students who are BIPOC and their white peers has closed over the year, in May 2021, 2 percent of high-minority districts were fully remote, 52 percent were hybrid, and 47 percent were fully in person, compared with less than 1 percent, 39 percent, and 61 percent, respectively, for low-minority districts.[27]

Heading into the new school year, as there is a growing push for all schools to be fully open,[28] districts will need to engage with parents and communities who are BIPOC to better understand their needs, establish trust, and reduce hesitancy to return to school.[29] Not only have these communities been exposed to and contracted the virus at higher rates,[30] but students who are BIPOC are more likely to attend schools that lack the infrastructure to enable safe reopening conditions.[31] As a result, their families are more reluctant to send their children back to in-person learning.[32] School districts must also remain vigilant—ensuring access to vaccines and other health care supports in underserved communities, wisely using American Rescue Plan Act funds to retrofit school buildings that have poor ventilation, and responding quickly and effectively to future outbreaks.

The good

Milwaukee Public Schools in Wisconsin created a plan that outlined what the district would do and what students, families, and staff would notice as a result.[33] They compared the district's three learning models—virtual, hybrid, and in-person—throughout every section of the plan and provided a transparent and detailed budgetary analysis across 10 categories, including health and safety, facilities, and nutrition. Starting in August 2020, the district has publicly reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and close contact cases as well as which schools had moved to virtual learning.[34] After returning to in-person learning in April 2020, there have been 137 confirmed cases[35] out of the approximately 71,325 students in the district.[36]

The bad

Florida forced Miami-Dade and Broward counties to reopen in October 2020 for in-person classes ahead of the schedule in the counties' approved plans.[37] Both districts had already planned a staggered reopening that would begin after the first quarter of the school year in order to give them time to put safety measures into place, but following Florida's directive, they complied with the quickened time frame. In the four days after reopening, Broward County reported 45 positive staff member cases and one student case.[38] In the three weeks after reopening, Miami-Dade County reported 74 employee and 177 student positive cases.[39] At Miami Senior High School, 200 students and 17 teachers had to isolate due to potential exposure.[40]

The ugly

North Paulding High School in Paulding County, Georgia, became a grim example of a rushed school reopening when a now-infamous photo of a crowded hallway went viral.[41] The high school reopened in August 2020 despite an outbreak on the football team, a district policy that mask wearing was a "personal choice," and a statement by the district that social distancing would "not be possible to enforce" in "most cases." The student who posted the photo was initially suspended for doing so in what the school alleged was a violation of the student code of conduct, though the school later reversed the suspension.[42] Nine positive cases were reported at the school in the three days following the date the photo was shared, causing the school to temporarily switch to remote learning.[43]

Trend 2: Digital divide

One of the biggest hurdles that districts faced when schools closed was ensuring that students had the technology and internet access to participate in remote learning. At the start of the pandemic, 16.9 million children nationwide did not have access to high-speed home internet, and 7.3 million children did not have access to a home computer.[44] This included 1 in 3 Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native households.[45] Students who are BIPOC, students from families with low incomes, and students in rural locations were significantly less likely to have access to the necessary technology to engage in remote learning. As previously discussed, because students who are BIPOC were more likely to engage in remote learning, the lack of this technology resulted in many of them being unable to access their education.[46] Similarly, districts struggled to provide English language learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care with the educational services and accommodations they are entitled to and rely on during remote learning.[47]

While progress has been made to close the digital divide, and will continue through the recent influx of federal dollars in the American Rescue Plan, many students have remained offline. One reason for this was a nearly 5-million-unit national laptop shortage at the beginning of the school year that left districts waiting while delivery dates were pushed further and further back.[48] For a district like Morongo Unified School District in California, where every student qualified for free lunch, a 5,000-unit laptop shortage left roughly half of the district's students without a computer.[49] By December 2020, at least 11 of the 25 largest districts in the country were still distributing computers or providing internet access to students.[50] At the start of 2021, 12 million students were still offline due to lack of device or high-speed internet,[51] with about 3 million to 4 million having received home internet access since the start of the pandemic.[52]

Many school districts, such as Montgomery, Alabama,[53] used internet-equipped school buses to provide hot spots to students. While an innovative solution in the short term, cramming students in cars or sitting them outside next to a school bus in the heat or cold for hours is not an ideal learning environment. For households with multiple students and other family members working from home, providing internet service did not always solve connectivity issues. In rural communities, such as Ector County Independent School District in West Texas,[54] providing personal hot spots to students still did not allow them to get online, as their hot spots were not in range of cell towers.

Furthermore, providing technology and internet access did not ensure that every student could thrive in an online learning environment. Many schools were not regularly using computers as part of their school work prior to the pandemic, and students who did not previously have devices at home were more likely to have lower computer literacy levels.[55] In one RAND Corp. survey, only 51 percent of teachers said that all or most of their students have the age-appropriate skills to successfully navigate technology for distance learning.[56] Many students also

lacked support in the household. In Washington state, for example, just 60 percent of parents rated themselves an A or B for their technological savviness.[57] As a result, providing technical assistance to students and their families was a necessary support to ensure student success, but one that was not always available. Another survey from the early months of the pandemic found that one-third of students reported they sometimes or never had access to technical support from their schools to address problems with their devices.[58] However, nearly 90 percent of teachers and a similar percentage of parents reported usually or always receiving help. For some families, accessing the provided tech support could be a challenge. The Equity in Education Coalition launched its own multilingual and multicultural call-in center in Washington state to support families who did not know how to access the tech support provided by districts or who faced a language barrier accessing that help.[59]

While educators may now have more access to technology and support, adjusting to teaching remotely was an entirely new skill set to learn. One Center on Reinventing Public Education study found that less than half of district reopening plans publicly committed to increasing time for professional development and planning during the school year.[60] At the same time, only 66 percent of teachers reported being very or extremely confident in using digital media services for teaching, and 1 in 7 had not previously used K-12 digital media services, according to a survey by GBH Education, a Boston-based public broadcasting group.[61] Training opportunities often depended on district resources, giving educators in wealthy districts an advantage. For example, Elk Grove Unified School District in California offered 190 voluntary training sessions during summer 2020 to prepare teachers for remote learning, but Washington Union School District, also in California, did not have enough resources to offer more than a few days of training right before school started.[62]

The good

In September 2020, Colorado partnered with T-Mobile to provide 34,000 students from low-income households with free Wi-Fi hot spots and 100 gigabytes of data per year for the next five years.[63] In addition, Colorado dedicated $2 million of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds toward purchasing hot spots for families.

The bad

Killeen Independent School District in Texas had to reopen classrooms for in-person learning earlier than planned because it was not reaching up to 7,000 students through virtual learning, and a shipment of 16,000 iPads intended to expand access to students was not expected to arrive until October 2020.[64]

The ugly

New York City is facing a lawsuit after failing to provide Wi-Fi for students in homeless shelters.[65] There are approximately 114,000 students who are experiencing homelessness in New York City schools, some of whom are still unable to access internet from a shelter more than nine months after remote learning began. New York City planned to install Wi-Fi in all shelters but projected it would not complete this process until summer 2021. Some of the most vulnerable students, including the 1.5 million experiencing homelessness, according to 2017–2018 federal data,[66] or the 7.3 million students with disabilities, according to 2019–2020 federal data,[67] are losing more and more instructional time as a result of the pandemic's impact on schools and learning.

Trend 3: Student resources in academics, school meals, and extracurriculars

Remote learning and the digital divide resulted in students and schools having to adapt to new academic challenges. At the same time, the important nonacademic services, such as school meals and extracurriculars, that schools provide to students were also affected by the pandemic.

Academic supports: Grading, testing, and graduation requirements

While the digital divide created unique challenges for students, the transition to remote learning was a difficult shift across the board. In spring 2020, many schools decided to forego traditional grading and switched to a pass-fail system. Five of the six largest districts in California changed their grading systems in the spring to ensure that students were not punished for the sudden change in learning.[68] Nine states also waived some of their graduation requirements, such as mandated courses, end-of-course exams, and minimum attendance hours.[69]

Likewise, the pandemic created upheaval with the college application process. In spring 2020, the College Board amended the Advanced Placement (AP) exam to be taken virtually at home, which resulted in some technical difficulties.[70] The number of exams taken in 2020 decreased by about 7 percent from 2019, but students' average scores were the highest they have been since 2000.[71] Moreover, dates for the SAT in spring 2020 were canceled with no virtual replacement. When testing dates resumed in fall 2020, many students had trouble finding an available slot due to increased demand.[72] The uncertainty and lack of access to testing led most colleges and universities to drop their requirement for applicants to submit test scores, and about 616 additional colleges reported that they would adopt test-optional applications for the 2021-22 school year.[73] Many schools, such as the University of California system, are planning to remain that way after the pandemic, citing concerns that standardized tests disadvantage students who are from low-income backgrounds and BIPOC.[74] The change in testing requirements led to a significant increase in applications to the country's top schools. For example, Harvard University saw a 57 percent increase in applications from the previous year.[75] At the same time, enrollment deferrals—students choosing to join the incoming class of 2025 instead of the class of 2024—also jumped from previous years. The University of Pennsylvania saw a roughly 300 percent increase in enrollment deferrals.[76] This may affect next year's acceptance rates, as many slots will already be filled with students who chose to defer.

While many districts reverted to letter grades in the fall, some continued to modify their grading policies. West Contra Costa and San Diego unified school districts in California, for example, decided not to punish students for late work or unexcused absences.[77] Long Beach Unified School District, also in California, went further, directing teachers to reduce homework, not grade homework, and

not give out Fs on assignments.[78] Beyond simply reducing stress, providing these grading flexibilities to students could also help address equity concerns by not penalizing students who are low income or BIPOC, who were less likely to have access to technology.[79]

The need for school meals

Schools not only serve as centers of learning but also provide additional critical services to students and their families. When schools closed during the pandemic, these services also had to adapt to the remote setting, pushing schools to implement new strategies for delivery or modifications to ensure safety. Before the pandemic, schools were serving approximately 15 million breakfasts and 30 million lunches every day at reduced or no cost to students.[80] With school cafeterias no longer open, schools had to turn to alternative methods to distribute meals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) established nationwide waivers in March 2020 to "streamline access, enhance program flexibility, and reduce administrative burden."[81] These waivers, since extended through summer 2021, allowed schools flexibility in how they distributed meals to students and expanded eligibility to all students. In spring 2020, 81 percent of schools distributed grab-and-go meals at drive-thru pickup sites, 42 percent delivered meals directly to homes, and 32 percent used bus routes to distribute meals.[82]

By the fall, however, only about 15 percent of children from low-income households who qualified for free or reduced meals were getting them.[83] Arizona's Tucson Unified School District, where 70 percent of families qualify, saw a 90 percent decrease at the start of this school year in the number of meals served per day.[84] This is especially concerning given that the number of children in need of these services has risen dramatically over the course of the pandemic. U.S. Census Bureau surveys found that children in 1 in 6 households were not eating enough in June 2020 because their families could not afford food,[85] and the Brookings Institution estimated that as many as 14 million children were going hungry during this time.[86] Food insecurity disproportionately affects Black and/or Hispanic/Latinx families, compared with their white counterparts. In September 2020, 1 in 4 families reported experiencing food insecurity in the previous 30 days, but among families where the parents were Black and/or Hispanic/Latinx, that number jumped to 4 in 10.[87] School nutrition is essential to students' ability to learn. A lack of nutrients in one's diet has been linked to poor motor and language skills and has lasting effects on how children's brains take shape.[88] Childhood hunger has also been tied to hyperactivity and poor memory, further reducing students' ability to access a quality education during the pandemic.[89]

The impact of extracurriculars

Another important part of a comprehensive education is access to extracurricular activities. Extracurriculars provide important opportunities for students to create social connections with peers, explore different interests, and reinforce lessons

from the classroom, and they help pave pathways to higher education.[90] Research has also found that participation in extracurriculars increases students' engagement with their school and decreases the likelihood of school failure and dropping out.[91] At the start of the pandemic, however, schools rightly canceled extracurriculars and sports as they closed. By the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, 16 states and Washington, D.C., had canceled or postponed at least some fall sports seasons.[92] Illinois, for example, postponed to spring 2021 what it determined to be "high risk" sports that are not conducive to social distancing, such as football and soccer, but allowed "low risk" sports, such as golf and tennis, to go forward in fall 2020.[93]

As the pandemic progressed, many schools turned to innovative solutions to safely engage students in extracurriculars. In fact, a 2020 survey found that students favored opportunities to "socialize with fellow students" and engage in "online clubs and other extracurricular activities" to address stress and isolation during the pandemic.[94] Two Rivers Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., started more than a dozen virtual student clubs, including Lego Club, Drawing Club, and Mindfulness Club to help younger students feel connected.[95] East Bay Innovation Academy in California even built dedicated time into the school day for club meetings to ensure students were able to participate.[96] When schools did reopen, clubs had to introduce health and safety protocols. Waukesha North High School in Wisconsin required club advisers to complete planning forms where they described plans to keep students socially distanced as well as sanitization measures.[97] The reintroduction of extracurriculars for students was an important way to provide some normalcy and regular social interaction and keep students engaged. In contrast, there were not many opportunities for innovation in sports, especially those such as football, which require students to be in close contact. While the resumption of sports may have provided some normalcy, like other extracurriculars did, they also posed a greater health risk, leading to positive COVID-19 cases.[98]

The good

Maryland was approved by the USDA to operate a Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program to provide breakfast, lunch, and a snack for all eligible children throughout the pandemic.[99] Families were mailed an EBT card loaded with funds, which they could use to purchase food directly while schools were closed rather than pick up or wait for delivery of meals at specific times.

The bad

Michigan saw a big spike in COVID-19 cases among children in spring 2021, hitting a record high in the state for hospitalizations for pediatric patients during the pandemic. Health officials cited outbreaks among youth athletes as one of the biggest drivers of these new infections. They reported 312 school outbreaks linked to classrooms, after-school activities, and sports.[100]

The ugly

The NAACP sued Leeds City School District in Alabama to restart meal services for students after the district decided to stop serving meals in April 2020.[101] Not only did this decision disproportionately affect the district's Black students, but the NAACP claims that it violated federal school desegregation orders.

Trend 4: Community engagement and activism

The pandemic and the move to remote learning has highlighted the importance of community engagement in education. With the uncertainty created by constantly shifting situations, effective communication with families has been essential to maintaining contact with students and providing them with the supports they need. Twenty-nine states engaged community members in some capacity when developing their reopening recommendations, and 36 states recommended that districts engage the community when developing their own plans.[102] Connecticut, for example, gathered input from more than 23,000 residents and 16,000-plus students when developing their reopening plan.[103]

Similarly, transparent communication with the community about COVID-19 cases in schools after reopening was critical. Fewer than half of states collected and provided any public data on COVID-19 cases in schools at the start of the 2020-21 school year.[104] This left districts to take the lead on reporting their cases. For example, Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia decided to send school-wide emails when a case was confirmed as well an alert to local media outlets.[105] Some districts in Florida even defied Gov. Ron DeSantis (R-FL) and publicly reported new cases among students and staff, leading the Florida Department of Health to ask some to take down their online dashboards that tracked cases.[106] However, an overall lack of reporting resulted in outside groups taking the job on themselves. Most notably, the National Education Association launched its own tracker breaking down cases by state, county, and school and linking to local news reports on infections.[107] Widespread lack of transparency has had real consequences when it comes to parents feeling comfortable sending students back to school when they reopened. This is especially prevalent in BIPOC-majority communities, who have been hit harder by the coronavirus,[108] where preexisting distrust in schools to keep their students safe has only been compounded by a lack of transparency and communication during the pandemic.[109]

The absence of clear communication, transparency, and community engagement has often manifested in a rise in protests, both in favor of and against reopening. By the start of August 2020, protests had already popped up in at least three dozen school districts across the country in favor of following state health guidelines to reopen schools.[110] Community activism continued throughout the year. About 80 parents protested outside Denver Public Schools district headquarters in October 2020 against the order that sent third to fifth graders back to remote learning.[111] In January 2021, about 100 teachers and parents protested against school reopening at Georgia's Cobb County School District,[112] and more than 120 educators called out sick on the first day of in-person instruction to protest reopening amid a surge of cases in the district.[113] In May 2021, parents and students rallied outside Palm Beach County School District headquarters in Florida, calling for an end to the district's mask mandate in schools.[114] Schools will need to work hard to rebuild trust and communication with these community members as they enter the new school year.

Districts should also learn from this rise in community activism and be sure to seek input on how to spend federal relief dollars. This is especially needed in BIPOC-majority communities and under-resourced communities, where parent and student needs are unique and challenging, and meeting them is critical to ensuring that children continue learning successfully. Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education already requires states and districts to include input from students, families, educators, and other stakeholders;[115] these groups have important insight into what supports will be needed in the new school year to reopen school buildings successfully and address the challenges from the past school year. Some states, such as Georgia,[116] have already begun collecting feedback, but they will need to ensure that they are actively engaging in outreach, especially to marginalized communities who have been most affected by the pandemic.

The good

Madison School District in Wisconsin launched its Big Ideas campaign to gather ideas from the community on how best to spend $9.5 million in federal relief funding, half of the federal money allocated to the district.[117] The Big Ideas campaign will collect proposals from the community that describe the idea and the effect it will have on the community, a cost estimate, and staff needed to operate. The district is also asking that ideas target supports for "students of color, English language learners, special education students, early learners, students who are without stable housing, students in the district's Opportunity Youth program, or students who are unable to physically attend school in person because of hospitalization or incarceration."

The bad

In August 2020, hundreds of Arizona parents rallied in support of reopening school buildings, despite the fact that Arizona had the highest number of child COVID-19 cases per capita in the country at the time. Reports indicated that the majority of the crowd was not wearing a mask during the rally, as Arizona cases approached 188,000.[118]

The ugly

Gov. DeSantis falsely claimed that Florida ranked 34th among states in per capita pediatric COVID-19 cases while defending his decision to reopen school buildings in August.[119] Florida did not include children older than 14 years old in the report cited by the governor, while all other states besides Utah included older children. When in the proper context, Florida actually ranked ninth among U.S. states in COVID-19 infections for children ages 0–17.

Trend 5: Educators

Like students and families, educators have been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. When schools closed, educators had to completely reinvent how they performed their jobs. The stress of the pandemic clearly took its toll. A November 2020 report found that 77 percent of educators were working more hours than in the year prior, 60 percent enjoyed their job less, and 27 percent were considering leaving their job.[120] A 2021 RAND Corp. survey found that 44 percent of teachers who left their jobs during COVID-19 cited the pandemic as their primary reason for leaving.[121] For teachers younger than 40, low pay that did not justify the stress and health risks and child care responsibilities were their top reasons. Teachers older than 40 cited

health conditions putting them at risk as their primary factor. States such as Georgia and Utah offered pandemic bonuses of $1,000 and $1,500, respectively, in an effort to retain staff.[122] From August to October 2020, Dallas Independent School District saw 62 teacher resignations, with 16 specifically citing COVID-19-related reasons.[123] Interestingly, this resignation rate was 50 percent lower than the rate during that time frame in 2019.[124] This may be because like many others, educators may not have had the economic means to leave their positions. The pandemic caused 64 percent of educators to contribute less or stop paying into their general savings accounts, while 39 percent paid less or none of their credit card balances, and 12 percent paid less or none of their mortgage or rent.[125]

While some teachers chose to leave the workforce this year, others were laid off as their schools faced the brunt of the pandemic-caused economic recession. In October, the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that state and local education employment was down 8.8 percent from the previous year, though many of these were temporary layoffs or positions left unfilled.[126] In seven states, local education employment fell more than 10 percent.[127] Facing a $57 million budget gap in December 2020, Philadelphia School District announced it may need to lay off or furlough employees after already instituting a central office hiring freeze and not hiring supplemental teachers.[128] Ultimately, it seems federal relief dollars have prevented these layoffs from happening.[129] In Arizona, however, Tucson Unified School District failed to renew contracts for 60 teachers for the 2021-22 school year.[130]

Both resignations and layoffs have contributed to a rising number of teacher shortages, a problem that existed before the pandemic.[131] In fact, Arizona started the school year facing the worst teacher shortage it had ever seen, with more than 1,700 teacher positions unfilled.[132] In Denver, having lost about half of their substitute teacher pool, the district resorted to asking parents to volunteer as substitutes.[133]

One of the biggest factors in getting educators back into the classroom was vaccinating them as soon as possible. Twenty-eight states and Washington, D.C., had opened priority vaccination to educators by mid-February 2021.[134] All educators were eligible by April 2021.[135] With the newest influx of relief funds in the American Rescue Plan, districts will have the opportunity to invest in supports for their educators, avoid layoffs, and hire additional staff to address unfinished learning and safe reopenings.

The good

Michigan has allocated $53 million in hazard pay for teachers and $20 million for support staff. Staff received MI Classroom Heroes Grants in the form of $500 bonus payments to teachers and $250 to support staff.[136]

The bad

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R) threatened to not begin teacher vaccinations at schools that did not return to in-person learning by March 1, 2021. While most school districts were already planning to return by that date, there were a few that indicated they would not reopen their buildings by then, which the governor called "simply not acceptable."[137]

The ugly

Gilbert Public Schools in Arizona laid off 152 teachers and staff for the 2021-22 school year due to declining enrollment during the pandemic. This is a reduction of about 7.5 percent of employees, including the only teacher in the drama program.[138]

Conclusion

This past year has been extremely difficult for everyone involved in the education system, but as schools look to recovery, it is important that the lessons learned during this time are not forgotten and the mistakes made are not repeated. Remote learning is likely to remain in the short term, until the United States brings coronavirus transmission under control, but also as a permanent option for some students post-pandemic,[139] as climate disasters force schools to close[140] and even to avoid the occasional snow day.[141] Schools must learn from their successes and failures this year to ensure that there is not just a return to the status quo. School buildings that remain open for in-person learning during the pandemic should take appropriate precautions for student and educator health, including mask wearing, social distancing, and monitoring the local level of COVID-19 transmission. In areas where it remains unsafe to reopen, districts must take steps to provide quality remote education to all students.

There is clearly a long way to go to close the digital divide—a goal that schools and districts should not give up on in an increasingly digital world. Schools, districts, and state departments of education should seek out opportunities for innovation to ensure that their students are receiving all the wraparound supports they need to flourish in school. Likewise, schools should aim to be the center of the community, engaging families as they build back from the pandemic and maintaining relationships in the future. And finally, educators should be given the respect, resources, and compensation they deserve. With the unprecedented influx of federal funding, there is an opportunity to transform the education system into one that can provide all students with a quality education.

Megan Ferren is a research assistant for K-12 Education at the Center for American Progress.

Endnotes

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