EMBARGOED UNTIL 7:30 AM ON TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2020

Elementary and Secondary Education in the Pandemic: An Analysis of School Reopening and Distance Learning in Rhode Island

October 2020

RIPEC

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted nearly every aspect of human activity in the United States and across the globe. Rhode Island's elementary and secondary education system has been no exception. And given the centrality of our schools to the daily life of students and families, the issue of how to adapt the K-12 system given the public health challenges of the pandemic has been the source of enormous interest and controversy.

As the pandemic spread in the United States in March of this year, elementary and secondary schools were closed across the country. In Rhode Island, Governor Gina Raimondo ordered schools to move up their one-week April vacation on March 13, and thereafter ordered all schools to close. Compared to many other states, Rhode Island responded quickly to offer remote learning to all students, as teacher-instructed distance learning was slow to get off the ground in many school districts across the country. Indeed, according to an analysis from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), only about a third of districts in the United States initially required teachers to provide instruction, track student engagement, or monitor progress.[1] By mid-April, 83% of families said their child was receiving some form of remote instruction.[2]

However, like schools across the country, elementary and secondary schools in Rhode Island had little to no experience in distance learning. Some school districts struggled to provide the internet access and devices needed for remote instruction, student attendance fell in some districts, and there were gaps in educational supports required for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Not surprisingly, educators, families, and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) agree that students experienced some degree of learning loss in the spring, although there appears to be no publicly available student assessments and little public information on educational outcomes.

For the fall, there has been a general push across the country and in Rhode Island to open schools for in-person instruction. However, public health requirements, space limitations, and other concerns have made it difficult for many school systems to fully reopen, both in Rhode Island and nationally. In Rhode Island, the school districts that have fully reopened have been suburban and rural districts in higher-income areas of the state. In contrast, many of the state's urban districts in lower-income communities are less open, and therefore rely more heavily on distance learning.[3]

---

[1] Bianca Vázquez Toness and Dan McGowan, "When it comes to online learning, Mass., Rhode Island take wildly divergent paths," April 22, 2020; Center for Reinventing Public Education, "Districts and CMOs are Making Progress on Instruction and Monitoring, but Lag in Grading and Attendance," April 15, 2020.

[2] Megan Brenan, "Over 8 in 10 Parents Now Say Their Child is Learning Remotely," Gallup, April 8, 2020.

[3] The percentage of students to qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program per district is a common means of determining whether a community is high- or low-income, though no specific threshold exists with which to designate a district as such. As of the 2018-2019 school year, approximately 45 percent of Rhode Island's public school students qualified for free or reduced lunch, but eligibility varied widely across the state; fewer than 10 percent of students were eligible for the program in the state's four highest-income districts—East Greenwich (5 percent),

Importantly, the governor determined that no student would be compelled to attend school in-person, essentially requiring all schools to provide remote learning to those students whose families choose this option.

In Rhode Island, the student learning losses linked to distance learning raise particular concerns given the student performance challenges experienced by the state's elementary and secondary public schools before the pandemic. While the nationally administered National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has shown that the learning outcomes of Ocean State students are on par with U.S. students overall, Rhode Island lags states within the region. On the most recent (2019) NAEP, for instance, Rhode Island posted lower scores than every other New England state in fourth and eighth grade Reading, as well as eighth grade Mathematics.[4] The gap in educational outcomes between Rhode Island and its closest neighbor—Massachusetts—are particularly stark.[5] Perhaps most troubling is the extent of disparity in demonstrated proficiency between certain student subgroups, and between lower- and higher-income school districts, in Rhode Island. Multilingual learners (MLL) in particular have notably low levels of proficiency when compared to both MLL students on a national scale and their Rhode Island peers who speak English as a first language.[6]

In response to these gaps in student performance, longstanding education reform efforts were renewed in 2019, as Rhode Island legislators introduced a package of seven education reform bills to overhaul elementary and secondary education in the state. Ultimately, three bills passed into law: measures to move local education governance closer to a school-based management model, create a fast-track principal certification program, and align curriculum frameworks, curriculum,

---

Barrington (5 percent), Jamestown (9 percent), and Little Compton (9 percent)—compared to greater than 70 percent student eligibility in the state's three lowest-income districts: Woonsocket (71 percent), Central Falls (71 percent), and Providence (87 percent). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations.

[4] In fourth grade Mathematics, Rhode Island results were the fifth lowest in New England, besting only Vermont. National Center for Education Statistics – The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics, State Achievement-Level Results, Reading, State Achievement-Level Results.

[5] For example, 47 percent of Massachusetts eighth graders were achieving at or above proficient scores on the 2019 NAEP Mathematics assessment compared to 29 percent of Rhode Island eighth graders. In terms of Reading, eighth graders in Massachusetts bested their Rhode Island peers by 10 percentage points, with 45 percent scoring at or above proficient compared to 35 percent of Rhode Islanders. National Center for Education Statistics – The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics, State Achievement-Level Results, Reading, State Achievement-Level Results. On the 2019 RICAS/Next-Generation MCAS, the difference between the two states was no less apparent: 30 percent of Rhode Island students met or exceeded expectations in Mathematics, compared to 49 percent of Massachusetts students, and while 38 percent of Rhode Island students met or exceeded expectation in English Language Arts, 52 percent of Massachusetts students achieved the same. RIDE, 2019 Statewide Assessment Results, Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS); Massachusetts Department of Education, MCAS Achievement Results, 2019.

[6] On the 2019 NAEP, 2 percent of eighth grade MLL students in Rhode Island achieved proficiency in Reading (compared to 4 percent nationally and 35 percent among Rhode Island students overall) and 1 percent achieved proficiency in math (compared to 5 percent nationally and 29 percent among Rhode Island students overall). The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics, State Achievement-Level Results, Reading, State Achievement-Level Results.

and learning materials statewide.[7] Also in 2019, the state's new Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Angélica Infante-Green, implemented a state takeover of Providence—by far the state's largest district—in response to both low levels of student proficiency and an alarming analysis produced by Johns Hopkins researchers.[8] Only 14 percent of Providence public school students demonstrated proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA) and Literature and only 10 percent demonstrated proficiency in Mathematics on the 2018 Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS).[9]

This report analyzes the key aspects of elementary and secondary educational experiences in Rhode Island during the pandemic, considering historical and national trends as well as educational best practices as determined by current research and academic studies. It first delves into the state of virtual and blended learning before the pandemic, and then provides an overview of elementary and secondary instruction in the spring, before analyzing the additional funding made available to Rhode Island school districts for expenses connected to responding to the pandemic. Finally, this report provides a detailed analysis of the educational delivery that is occurring now—in the fall of 2020—in Rhode Island's elementary and secondary public schools. Specifically, this report focuses on answering the following questions:

- What additional funding has been made available and how is the funding being utilized by school districts?
- To what extent are school districts offering in-person learning?
- What kind of remote learning is being offered?
- Do students have the devices and internet access needed for remote learning?
- Have teachers received professional development in distance learning instruction?

In pursuing these areas of inquiry for each of Rhode Island's public school districts, RIPEC has relied on school district reopening plans, district communications to families, media reports, school committee meeting materials, outreach to districts and to RIDE, and other sources. In reporting on these matters, RIPEC recognizes that some of this information is changing in real time, and that identifying relevant official or authoritative sources at times has been challenging.

[7] RIPEC, "Reforming Structures of Education Governance: Legislative Elementary and Secondary Education Reform in Rhode Island, 2019," August 2019.
[8] Johns Hopkins School of Education Institute for Education Policy, "Providence Public School District: A Review," June 2019; RIDE, Providence Public Schools 2019 Review.
[9] RIDE, 2019 Statewide Assessment Results, Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS).

II. Virtual and Blended Learning Before the Pandemic

When public schools in Rhode Island and across the country were closed in the spring and were required to deliver instruction virtually on a remote basis, schools generally had little to no experience with remote learning upon which to rely. At the same time, virtual learning was not entirely a blank slate. This section provides a brief overview of virtual and blended learning experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the rise of virtually facilitated learning in both the United States and Rhode Island, and additionally reviews academic literature pertaining to the educational outcomes of a virtual education in comparison to that obtained at a brick-and-mortar school.

The terms used in this area can be confusing and are sometimes used interchangeably. In virtual learning, all instruction is delivered through the internet or computer software and typically, but not necessarily, takes place outside of a traditional brick-and-mortar school. Blended learning refers to schools and programs in which students experience significant amounts of both in-person and virtual instruction. Hybrid learning is often used interchangeably with blended learning, but during the pandemic typically refers more directly to models of instruction delivered in part through in-person instruction in a brick-and-mortar school and in part virtually in a remote setting. The term distance learning is more straightforward and refers to instruction delivered remotely outside of a brick-and-mortar school.

Virtual and Blended Learning in the United States

In the 2017-2018 school year, over 501 full-time virtual schools and 300 blended schools were operating in the United States. Combined, these schools served 430,672 students. Following a consistent trend, enrollment in virtual and blended schools has grown in recent years, with an increase in year-over-year enrollment exceeding 18,000 students in the 2017-2018 school year.[10] However, the vast majority—over 99 percent—of students in the United States attended traditional brick-and-mortar schools in 2017-2018.[11]

39 states had virtual and/or blended-learning schools in 2017-2018, whether district, state, or charter-operated. However, nearly four-fifths (79.1 percent) of virtual school students attended a charter school and nearly two-thirds (64.4 percent) of virtual school students attended a large-scale virtual school operated by a for-profit education management organization. While no law expressly forbids an entirely virtual learning experience in Rhode Island, the Ocean State was one of only four states to offer a blended, but not virtual, education as of the 2017-2018 school year.[12] The

[10] Alex Molnar, ed., Virtual Schools in the U.S., 2019, National Education Policy Center, May 2019.
[11] Ibid; U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey," 2017-2018; RIPEC calculations.
[12] Alex Molnar, ed., Virtual Schools in the U.S., 2019, National Education Policy Center, May 2019.

same year, eleven states offered neither virtual nor blended learning experiences to public school students.[13]

Virtual and Blended Learning in Rhode Island

Finding that Rhode Island was "one of the few states" that had not yet established "statewide policies on virtual education," the General Assembly enacted the Rhode Island Virtual Education Act in 2012, which required the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education to set protocols and processes for virtual and blended learning.[14] The guidance produced by the commissioner pursuant to the statute is not particularly proscriptive, but it does call on local education agencies (LEAs) to enact virtual learning policies that "provide some level of flexibility for student choice" and that "allow for students to demonstrate achievement in self-placed online coursework based on proficiency level." Additionally, state guidance states that LEAs must "ensure that teachers are effective in supporting student success in online learning opportunities" by requiring teachers to be "knowledgeable in online instruction strategies and pedagogy."[15] According to RIDE, several LEAs have laid out and implemented plans to increase the personalization of educational outcomes by "leveraging technology and blended learning strategies."[16]

However, it appears that most districts have not adopted virtual learning policies, as directed by RIDE. In fact, the initiative appears to have lost steam; while the 2012 Virtual Education Act required the commissioner to "prepare a report each fiscal year that documents the conditions under which virtual education supports student learning in Rhode Island" and to post that report on RIDE's website, there is no report available after 2015.[17] According to RIDE's 2015 report, only 12 LEAs reported offering online courses in a full online setting in fiscal year (FY) 2014 and only four LEAs reported offering online learning in a supervised brick-and-mortar setting.[18] Notwithstanding the 2012 Virtual Education Act and RIDE's regulatory protocols, on a state level there appears to have been little advancement of virtual learning prior to the pandemic.[19] The one

[13] Ibid.
[14] R.I. Gen. Laws, § 16-22.1-2; § 16-22.1-6.
[15] RIDE, Regulations of the Board of Regents Governing Virtual Learning Education in Rhode Island, 2012.
[16] RIDE, Virtual & Digital Learning Policy, Annual Reporting.
[17] R.I. Gen Laws § 16-22.1-6; RIDE, Virtual & Digital Learning Policy, Annual Reporting.
[18] The LEAs offering online courses in a virtual setting were New Shoreham, Bristol-Warren, Coventry, Cumberland, Middletown, Newport, North Kingstown, North Providence, North Smithfield, Pawtucket, Providence, and Westerly. The LEAs offering virtual learning in a brick-and-mortar setting were Bristol-Warren, Newport, North Kingstown, and Tiverton. RIDE, "RI Virtual Learning, Annual Legislative Report," March 2015.
[19] Four of the state's 23 charter schools are blended learning schools: the Village Green Charter School, Nowell Leadership Academy, Highlander, and Blackstone Valley Prep. RIDE, Rhode Island Large Scale 1:1 Implementations. Together, enrollment at these four charters comprised 1,329 students, or less than one percent of the state's total public school student body, in the 2018-2019 school year. U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations.

exception would appear to be the use of virtual instruction in the case of school closure resulting from inclement weather or other emergency.[20]

While virtual learning may not have advanced in Rhode Island, according to RIDE, districts have continued to increase their use of technology and digital learning between 2015 and 2020. The number of districts providing 1:1 take-home devices for at least some grade levels grew from nine districts in 2015 to 22 districts in 2017, for instance.[21] The number of districts with so-called 1:1 device initiatives has only increased since that time.[22]

Educational Outcomes of a Virtual Education

Despite growing interest in virtual learning over the last decade, there is clear consensus that the educational outcomes of elementary and secondary education students engaged in virtual learning are worse overall than those for students in traditional brick-and-mortar schools.[23] Researchers have found that the standardized test scores of virtual learning students are lower than that of their peers receiving in-person instruction across subject disciplines, including English, math, science, and social studies. One recent study from Brown University's Annenberg Institute found that students who returned to brick-and-mortar schools were typically able to "almost fully recover" the losses reflected in lower test scores, but the same study found a staggering ten percentage point drop in graduation rates among students who had ever attended a full-time virtual school. While researchers agree that virtual education produces significantly lower educational outcomes overall, the Annenberg study points out that "for some particular students this setting could still be beneficial," particularly for those students who would otherwise drop out of school or face some "other negative outcomes such as committing a crime."[24]

[20] As of 2017, Rhode Island has enabled LEAs to submit plans to RIDE for approval to conduct up to three days of virtual instruction when schools are physically closed in consequence of inclement weather or another emergency. RI Gen. Laws § 16-2-2(c); RIDE, Virtual Instructional Day Laws and Guidance.

[21] Linda Borg, "More R. I. districts place laptops in hands of students," *Providence Journal*, September 1, 2015; Kendra Gravelle, "Schools examine privacy issues with 1:1 initiative," *Narragansett Times*, June 11, 2017.

[22] RI ACLU, "Zooming in on Students: How Virtual Education Gets an 'F' in Protecting Student Privacy," September 2020.

[23] For example: Jennifer Heissel, "The relative benefits of live versus online delivery: Evidence from virtual algebra I in North Carolina," *Economics of Education Review*, August 2016; James Woodworth et al, "Online Charter School Study," Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, 2015; June Ahn and Andrew McEachin, "Student Enrollment Patterns and Achievement in Ohio's Online Charter Schools," *Educational Researcher*, January 2017; Jordan Rickles et al, "Getting Back on Track: The Effect of Online Versus Face-to-Face Credit Recovery in Algebra I on High School Credit Accumulation and Graduation," *American Institutes for Research*, June 2017; Jessica Mislevy et al, "Comparing the achievement of students in Virtual Virginia and face-to-face courses," *Regional Educational Laboratory Programs Appalachia*, February 2020; Carycruz Bueno, "Bricks and Mortar vs. Computers and Modems: The Impacts of Enrollment in K-12 Virtual Schools," Annenberg Institute, Brown University, July, 2020.

[24] Carycruz Bueno, "Bricks and Mortar vs. Computers and Modems: The Impacts of Enrollment in K-12 Virtual Schools," Annenberg Institute, Brown University, July, 2020.

Research on the effect of virtual learning on vulnerable populations—including low-income students, special education students, and multilingual learners—is limited. However, a 2015 comparative national analysis of online charter schools and traditional public schools found that multilingual learners had particularly weak academic growth in online charter schools compared to their peers receiving instruction in brick-and-mortar schools.[25]

No studies have been conducted on the outcomes of virtual or blended learning in Rhode Island in particular. In RIDE's 2015 report on the state of virtual learning in Rhode Island, the department stated that it was "unable to report on the link between assessment data and virtual learning" due to inadequate data collection as well as the state's transition away from the Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standardized assessment.[26]

[25] James Woodworth et al, "Online Charter School Study," Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, 2015.
[26] RIDE, "RI Virtual Learning, Annual Legislative Report," March 2015.

III. Distance Learning in Spring 2020

The public health crisis that materialized in the United States in the spring of 2020 compelled schools across the country and in Rhode Island to provide educational opportunities at a distance. While some of the models that were used reflect the virtual and blended learning models cultivated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a wide variety of tactics were utilized across the country, often without the benefit of forethought. This section offers a summation of the state of public elementary and secondary education in the spring of 2020 and discusses the difficulties in measuring the extent of student learning losses during that period.

Distance Learning in the United States

For many students across the country, little learning occurred after the closure of schools in the spring. A survey from the Rand Institute conducted between April 27 and May 11 found that, over a month into the crisis, over a quarter of teachers—26 percent—reported that they were not holding any instruction sessions that featured two-way communication between themselves and their students.[27] Similarly, an analysis from the American Enterprise Institute found that, by the end of the school year, 40 percent of schools offering remote instruction were providing only perfunctory services, relying on instructional packets, not requiring student participation, and not grading any student work. Only 20 percent of schools, according to the Institute, were providing a "rigorous education."[28]

National surveys additionally found that factors such as economic background, race, language, and disability status frequently impacted the learning experiences students received in the spring of 2020. A survey of educators conducted in May found that 84 percent of teachers from high-income districts reported that their students participated in distance learning throughout the school week, compared to 51 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools.[29] In part, this difference was due to disparate access to technology; approximately one in three teachers in high-poverty schools reported that their students faced technological limitations, including access to internet and devices.[30] Beyond technological access, however, many educators had difficulty providing special populations with the additional services they required. A survey of 501 school district superintendents, for instance, found that over four-fifths expressed that it was difficult to provide an equitable education to special education students while remote.[31]

---

[27] Laura S. Hamilton et. al, "COVID-19 and the State of K-12 Schools," Rand Institute, 2020.
[28] Nat Malkus, "School District Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Round 6, Ending the Year of School Closures," American Enterprise Institute, June 22, 2020.
[29] Educators for Excellence, "Voices from the Virtual Classroom: A Survey of America's Teachers on COVID-19-Related Education Issues," 2020.
[30] Laura S. Hamilton et. al, "COVID-19 and the State of K-12 Schools," Rand Institute, 2020.
[31] The School Superintendent Association, June 12, 2020 Memo, "Initial Findings: Covid Survey 2 Impact on Public Schools."

It is consequently unsurprising that a Gallup poll conducted in early April 2020 found that nearly half—49 percent—of parents were "moderately" or "very concerned" about the effect of the pandemic on their child's education.[32]

Distance Learning in Rhode Island

Compared to the nation, Rhode Island schools were quick to establish distance learning protocols. The Ocean State was among the first nationwide, and the first in New England, to close schools in response to the pandemic. To give the state time to assess and plan without losing school days, Governor Raimondo ordered that LEAs move up their one-week April vacation to March 16. LEAs were thereafter required to submit distance learning plans to the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education for approval, and RIDE facilitated the creation of LEA plans by issuing guidance.[33]

RIDE's guidance directed LEAs to: create a task force or steering committee, encourage educators to establish a routine that leveraged online learning, establish a means of determining attendance, ensure equitable access to technology, prioritize district communication with staff and staff communication with families, and provide guidance on protecting student privacy. LEAs were further instructed to encourage educators to use both synchronous and asynchronous instruction techniques. Synchronous learning is when some form of two-way communication, such as video or teleconferencing, takes place between one or more student(s) and their teacher, while asynchronous instruction is when a student is engaged in a solitary learning activity, such as reading or watching a prerecorded lesson. RIDE additionally offered guidance for the length of distance learning school days (4-6 hours) and approximate screen time per day (from 1-4 hours, depending on grade level), as described in Figure 1. For differently-abled students and multilingual learners, RIDE's guidance proposed that districts establish enhanced communication with students' families and set out a plan for providing additional services.[34]

Figure 1
RIDE Distance Learning Guidance:
Length of School Day & Approximate Screen Time

Grade Level	Proposed Length of School Day	Approximate Screen Time Guidance
Kindergarten	4-6 Hours	1-2 Hours
1st-6th		3-4 Hours
Middle		3 Hours
High		4 Hours

Source: RIDE, Distance Learning Guidance 2020

[32] Megan Brenan, "Over 8 in 10 Parents Now Say Their Child is Learning Remotely," April 8, 2020.
[33] Bianca Vázquez Toness and Dan McGowan, "When it comes to online learning, Mass., Rhode Island take wildly divergent paths," April 22, 2020; RIDE, "Distance Learning 2020: Guidance for Ensuring Educators, Families, and Students are Supported," Last Revised April 17, 2020.
[34] RIDE, "Distance Learning 2020: Guidance for Ensuring Educators, Families, and Students are Supported," Last Revised April 17, 2020.

RIDE has reported that all LEAs submitted distance learning plans within a week of the order directing their issuance.[35]

Despite RIDE's guidance on equitable access to technology, there is evidence that LEAs struggled in providing access on an equal basis. Providence—which is by far the state's largest district, serving over 15 percent of the state's public school students—found that as many as 11 percent of families surveyed reported that the student(s) in their home did not have reliable access to devices during distance learning and 8 percent did not have reliable access to internet.[36] In some districts, 1:1 access—one device per student, rather than per home—was an issue. In Cranston, the state's second largest district, a survey of families found that 9 percent of students were sharing a device with another family member.[37]

Attendance data provided by RIDE also shows disparity between districts in terms of student attendance during the spring of 2020. For instance, while Lincoln saw a 5.3 percent increase in its attendance rate when comparing the period from March to May 2019 to the same period in 2020, Central Falls reported a 12.8 percent decrease in attendance rates when compared to the previous year. While most districts experienced slighter increases or decreases in attendance as compared to the prior year, overall attendance rates generally fell between March and May 2020 statewide. Attendance rates also fell statewide for students with IEPs in particular, while this subgroup additionally had lower attendance rates in comparison to the previous year from March through May.[38] Of course, precisely what it meant to be counted as present for the purpose of attendance is not as clear cut under the distance learning model as in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting. RIDE required all LEAs to set policies for attendance, but district distance learning and reopening plans indicate that those policies often offered schools and teachers considerable leeway. In various classrooms, students might be determined to be present if they turned in work, attended a synchronous learning session, and/or marked themselves as present on a virtual sign-in sheet.

---

[35] RIDE, Presentation to R.I. House Health, Education, and Welfare Committee, June 3, 2020.

[36] U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations; Providence Schools Draft Reopening Plan for School Year 2020-21, July 31, 2020.

[37] U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations; Cranston School Department Plan for School Reopening.

[38] RIDE, Attendance Data, Response to a Question from the R.I. House Committee on Health, Education and Welfare, June 3, 2020. Underscoring the trends apparent in attendance data, a survey conducted by the Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN) raises concerns that students with IEPs did not receive adequate support in distance learning. Nearly 60 percent of the families surveyed by RIPIN stated that their students required the support of an adult at home "all of the time" while distance learning and over 50 percent either somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statement "I am confident that my child made sufficient progress during distance learning." RIPIN, Distance Learning & Special Education Parent Survey, August 6, 2020.

Spring 2020 Learning Loss

In both Rhode Island and nationally there is an assumption shared by educators, families, and policymakers that students on average experienced some degree of learning loss during the spring of 2020. However, there is a lack of available data with which to both prove the point and determine the extent of learning loss. The nationally-administered SAT was cancelled due to the public health crisis, and thereby eliminated the ability for a year-over-year comparison of results.[39] Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education responded to the coronavirus by providing waivers to states which enabled them to suspend federally-mandated testing. Consequently, the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System—which annually assesses student outcomes in Mathematics and ELA and Literature for grades three through eight—was not administered.[40]

According to RIDE's testimony at a House Committee on Health, Education, and Welfare hearing in June, a number of LEAs reported interim assessments administered before the end of the 2019-2020 school year, and the majority of districts indicated plans for assessments in the Fall semester, in effort to gauge student learning loss.[41] Those assessments, however, were not standardized across the state, nor have any assessment results been made publicly available.

[39] College Board, College Board Cancels May SAT in Response to Coronavirus, March 16, 2020.
[40] Linda Borg, RICAS tests canceled because of coronavirus, April 4, 2020.
[41] RIDE, Response to House Health, Education, and Welfare Committee Questions, June 3, 2020.

IV. CARES Act Education Funding

LEAs across the country and in Rhode Island received additional funding through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which was signed into law on March 27, 2020. For Rhode Island, the CARES Act's Education Stabilization Fund dispersed $46.4 million for elementary and secondary education, with at least 90 percent of those funds—or $41.7 million—flowing directly to LEAs. RIDE was permitted to retain the remaining 10 percent. The funds could be used for broadly defined COVID-response activities, including coordinating for long-term closures, staff training, technology purchases, addressing the needs of vulnerable student populations, and administering summer learning programs.[42]

In order to help fill a large hole in the FY 2020 budget, the Rhode Island General Assembly swapped out state dollars earmarked for state aid to LEAs with Education Stabilization Fund money, essentially negating the additional Educational Stabilization Fund dollars by reducing general revenue appropriations for school aid in the same amount. However, the FY 2020 supplemental budget also appropriated $50 million from the state's $1.25 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund allocation to LEAs, resulting in a net increase of $8.2 million statewide. As further detailed in Figure 2, the $50 million earmarked by the state for LEAs from the Coronavirus Relief Fund was distributed under the Title I Part A formula of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for FY 2019, the same formula used for distributing Education Stabilization Fund allocations. The Title I Part A formula weights funding by accounting for the number of low-income students per LEA.[43]

The net result of these various shifts of funding is that LEAs in Rhode Island have available $50 million more in total than appropriated under the enacted FY 2020 budget, with the urban districts receiving the larger portion of this additional aid. Providence received an allocation of $17.2 million, over one-third of the total additional funding. Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and Central Falls received a total allocation of $27.4 million, over one-half of the total new dollars.[44]

[42] CARES Act, Section 18001; National Conference of State Legislatures, CARES Act Gives State Education Funding, Flexibility in Wake of COVID-19, April 1, 2020.
[43] R.I. General Assembly, 2020 – House Bill 7170 Substitute A as Amended; R.I. House Fiscal Advisory Staff Report, FY 2020 Revised Budget, 2020-H 7170, Substitute A, as Amended.
[44] Ibid. Coronavirus Relief Fund aid must either be spent or encumbered by December 30, 2020. U.S. Treasury, Coronavirus Relief Fund Guidance for State, Territorial, Local, and Tribal Governments, updated September 2, 2020.

Figure 2
Replacement of General Revenues with Education Stabilization Funds and Distribution of COVID-19 Relief Funds by School District

District	FY 2020 Enacted Aid*	Education Stabilization Funds	Revision to FY 2020 Enacted Aid	COVID-19 Relief Funds	Total FY 2020 Revised Aid	Revised Change to Enacted
Barrington	$ 5,872,943	$ 79,799	$ (79,799)	$ 95,647	$ 5,968,590	$ 95,647
Bristol-Warren×	14,855,717	485,476	(485,476)	581,891	15,437,608	615,891
Burrillville	13,164,631	394,852	(394,852)	473,269	13,637,900	473,269
Central Falls^	42,498,528	1,575,794	(1,575,794)	1,888,743	44,387,271	2,388,743
Chariho	2,147,804	315,655	(315,655)	378,344	2,526,147	378,344
Charlestown	1,543,508	-	-	-	1,543,508	-
Coventry	24,463,006	623,392	(623,392)	747,197	25,210,202	747,197
Cranston	65,623,892	2,304,283	(2,304,283)	2,761,910	68,385,801	2,761,910
Cumberland	21,686,834	530,621	(530,621)	636,001	22,322,835	636,001
East Greenwich	2,724,747	69,858	(69,858)	83,732	2,808,479	83,732
East Providence	36,282,710	1,343,727	(1,343,727)	1,610,588	37,893,298	1,610,588
Exeter-West Greenwich	6,419,481	142,555	(142,555)	170,866	6,590,347	170,866
Foster	1,214,958	52,429	(52,429)	62,841	1,277,800	62,841
Foster-Glocester	5,268,060	90,511	(90,511)	108,486	5,376,546	108,486
Glocester	2,272,359	149,926	(149,926)	179,701	2,452,059	179,701
Hopkinton	5,170,111	-	-	-	5,170,111	-
Jamestown	465,975	98,636	(98,636)	118,225	584,201	118,225
Johnston	18,288,991	660,667	(660,667)	791,875	19,080,865	791,875
Lincoln	14,418,820	476,313	(476,313)	570,908	14,989,728	570,908
Little Compton	403,595	33,278	(33,278)	39,886	443,482	39,886
Middletown	7,592,462	263,613	(263,613)	315,966	7,908,428	315,966
Narragansett	2,255,835	184,416	(184,416)	221,040	2,476,876	221,040
New Shoreham	132,830	12,538	(12,538)	15,028	147,858	15,028
Newport	12,580,979	795,683	(795,683)	953,704	13,534,682	953,704
North Kingstown	10,492,830	452,552	(452,552)	542,428	11,035,258	542,428
North Providence	23,382,239	720,309	(720,309)	863,361	24,245,600	863,361
North Smithfield	5,884,223	182,153	(182,153)	218,329	6,102,552	218,329
Pawtucket	91,306,394	3,618,740	(3,618,740)	4,337,415	95,643,809	4,337,415
Portsmouth	4,048,900	243,247	(243,247)	291,555	4,340,455	291,555
Providence	263,818,881	14,390,236	(14,390,236)	17,248,110	281,066,991	17,248,110
Richmond	4,640,811	-	-	-	4,640,811	-
Scituate	2,824,310	211,568	(211,568)	253,585	3,077,896	253,585
Smithfield	6,457,531	202,518	(202,518)	242,737	6,700,269	242,737
South Kingstown	5,433,317	352,990	(352,990)	423,093	5,856,410	423,093
Tiverton	7,239,775	194,599	(194,599)	233,246	7,473,020	233,246
Warwick	38,761,116	1,488,005	(1,488,005)	1,783,520	40,544,636	1,783,520
West Warwick	27,094,132	961,349	(961,349)	1,152,271	28,246,403	1,152,271
Westerly	8,656,589	552,501	(552,501)	662,227	9,318,816	662,227
Woonsocket	63,980,831	3,308,150	(3,308,150)	3,965,142	67,945,973	3,965,142
District Subtotal	**$870,836,655**	**$ 37,562,936**	**$ (37,562,936)**	**$ 45,022,865**	**$ 916,393,520**	**$45,556,865**
Charter Schools**	101,538,276	3,454,925	(3,454,925)	4,141,067	105,679,343	4,224,796
State Schools	24,595,802	671,097	(671,097)	804,375	25,400,177	804,375
Total^^	**$997,504,733**	**$ 41,688,959**	**$ (41,688,959)**	**$ 49,968,307**	**$1,047,473,039**	**$50,586,036**

* Includes adjustment for FY 2019 funding formula audit
× Total FY 2020 Revised Aid includes $34,000 in current law updates
^ Total FY 2020 Revised Aid includes $500,000 in Central Falls Stabilization
** Total FY 2020 Revised Aid includes $83,729 in current law updates
^^ Total FY 2020 Revised Aid includes $117,729 in current law updates and $500,000 in Central Falls Stabilization
Source: RI House Fiscal Advisory Staff, 2020-H 7170, Sub A as Amended

RIDE is responsible for distributing each LEA's allocation of Coronavirus Relief Fund dollars, and LEAs, in turn, must apply for their allocated funds. While LEAs were initially required to provide documentation to RIDE demonstrating that the costs incurred constitute an eligible expenditure (any cost facilitating in-person or distance learning) before receiving their allocation, U.S. Department of Treasury guidance issued on September 2 allowed LEAs to obtain an advance amount equal to up to $500 per student prior to documenting their expenditures.[45]

The application process for Coronavirus Relief Fund allocations is still in its early stages. To date, six school districts have had their documentation for Coronavirus Relief Fund allocations both approved by RIDE and uploaded to RIDE's grant portal: Barrington, East Greenwich New Shoreham, North Smithfield, Smithfield, and West Warwick. These districts collectively spent $1.8 million out of the $45 million allotted to Rhode Island districts, with nearly two-thirds of that sum—$1.2 million—allocated to West Warwick. Of the funds spent and accounted for by these six districts, well over half was expended on the salaries and benefits of unbudgeted employees such as IT specialists and tutors (34 percent), and on supplies and materials such as masks and space dividers (29.1 percent). Remaining expenditures were split between four categories: other purchased services like family food delivery costs accounted for 17.1 percent of expenditures, while property and equipment like cameras and laptops comprised 13.1 percent of expenditures, purchased professional and technical services such as broadband improvements made up 5.1 percent of expenditures, and 1.6 percent of expenditures can be attributed to purchased property services such as ventilation system inspections and repairs.[46]

[45] RIDE, "FY 2021 Supplemental Impact Education Aid for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) Program Assurances Affirmation."
[46] RIDE, AcceleGrants Database.

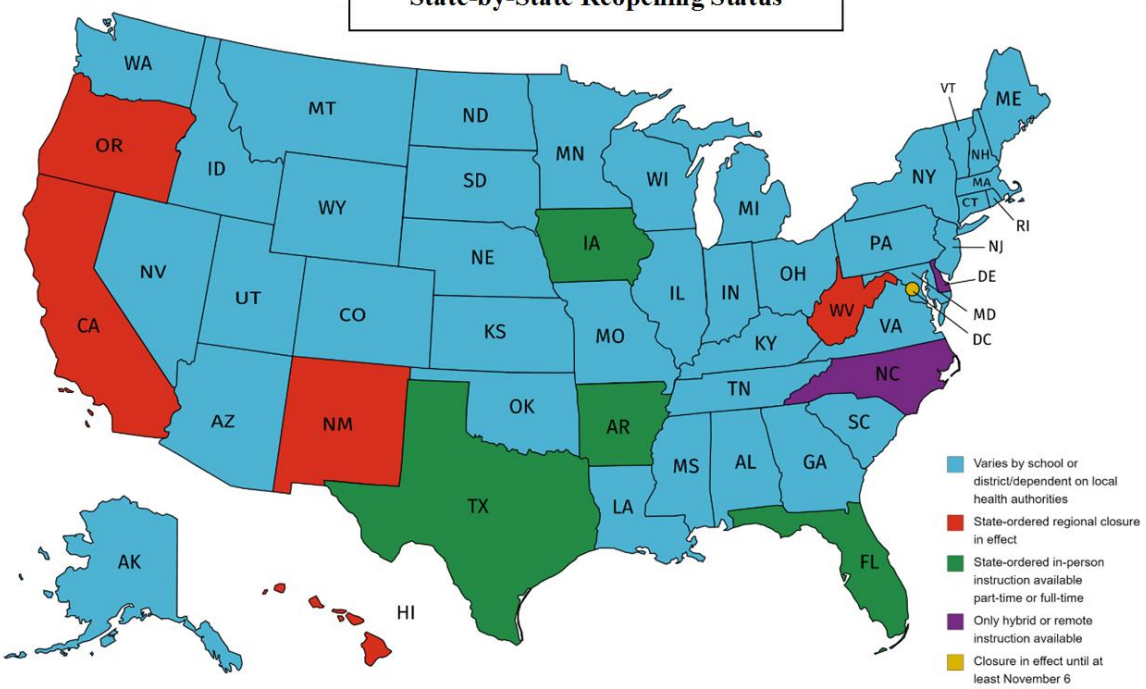
V. The Status of School Reopening – Fall 2020

Despite efforts by the governor and RIDE to promote a full reopening of schools, Rhode Island LEAs have not moved in lockstep to welcome back their student body for in-person learning for the fall of 2020. Similarly, school districts have taken divergent approaches in instructional strategies, with some degree of distance, or virtual, learning to be employed across Rhode Island's public system of elementary and secondary education for the foreseeable future. The remainder of this section delves into those differences, asks how student outcomes may be affected by districtwide plans, and additionally provides an overview of the status of school reopening on a national scale.

School Reopening in the United States

The cross-district discordance of school reopening in Rhode Island is hardly unique. In fact, as Figure 3 details, Rhode Island was among the 39 states in which reopening plans varied by school, district, or were dependent on local health authorities as of September 30. Alternatively, eleven states and Washington D.C. were operating under state-wide mandates; in-person instruction was available full- or part-time by state mandate in four states, five states had statewide or regional closures in effect, and two states permitted only hybrid or remote learning.

Figure 3
State-by-State Reopening Status



Note: Reopening status as of September 30, 2020; states with an order to provide in-person instruction may include exceptions to individual districts and/or populations of students
Source: Recreated from EdWeek, "Where are Schools Open?" Map

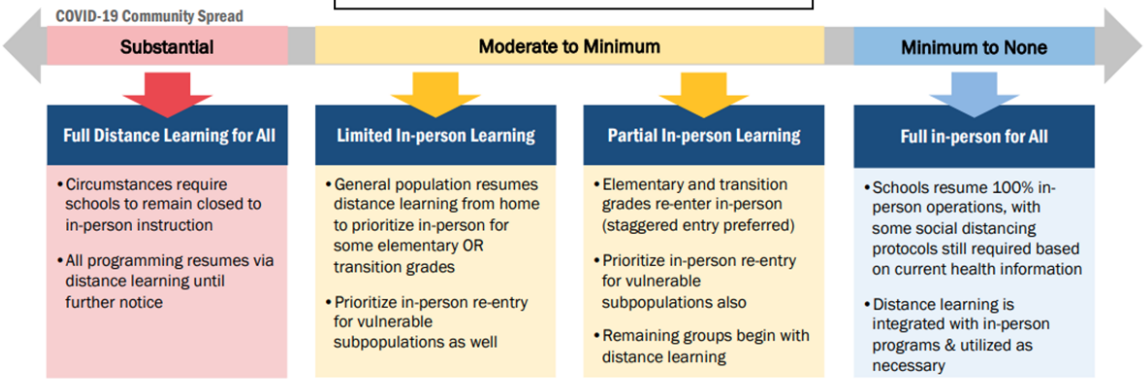
There is no comprehensive tally of the number of students with access to in-person learning in the United States, but a representative sampling of 477 districts across the country by CRPE in August determined that nearly half—48.9 percent—of districts planned to fully reopen while about a quarter—25.8 percent—intended to remain fully remote. Of sampled districts, 20 percent were either planning to operate on a hybrid model or else had reopening plans that varied by school and/or grade.[47]

CRPE additionally found that students in rural districts were much more likely to have access to full in-person instruction than their urban peers; 65.0 percent of rural districts planned to return to in-person learning full-time, compared to 24.1 percent of suburban districts and 9.2 percent of urban districts. Conversely, 79.0 percent of urban districts planned to offer only remote learning, in comparison to 33.8 percent of suburban districts and 12.8 percent of rural districts.[48] The students least likely to have access to in-person learning in the United States are consequently those who come from low-income families of color.[49]

School Reopening in Rhode Island

While the call from Governor Raimondo to close schools in March 2020 was quickly and without exception followed across the state, it has proven more difficult to fully reopen schools. Throughout the summer, the administration made its preference for full reopening clear but nonetheless required all LEAs to plan for four scenarios dependent on the extent of COVID-19's community spread: full distance learning for all, limited in-person learning, partial in-person learning, and full-in person for all, as depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Reopening Scenarios



Source: RIDE Reopening Guidance, July 19, 2020

[47] There was no information available on 5.8 percent of districts. Betheny Gross, Alic Opalka, and Padma Gundapaneni, "Getting Back to School: An Update on Plans from Across the Country," Center for Reinventing Public Education, August 2020.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Alec MacGillis, "The Students Left Behind by Remote Learning," *ProPublica*, September 28, 2020.

LEAs were required to submit their plans to RIDE for approval by the end of July and, once approved, were to make their plans available to the public. RIDE provided a reopening planning template to LEAs, laying out what information to include in their reopening plans.

Importantly, LEAs were instructed to explain how they would follow several new health and safety protocols. RIDE instructed that schools were "required to adhere" to Centers for Disease Control guidance "regarding the cleaning and disinfecting of all surfaces and spaces" and ensure that students, employees, and visitors have access to water and/or hand sanitizer "at all times." LEAs were further instructed to develop screening protocols for students and staff and to greatly reduce the number of people allowed in gathering spaces such as auditoriums and cafeterias. Arguably presenting the greatest challenge to LEAs are health and safety protocols pertaining to busing, which limit the number of students who are able to ride at one time by requiring stable ridership pods, limiting students per seat to one (except for students from the same household), and requiring that high-touch surfaces be disinfected between bus runs.[50]

RIDE additionally asked LEAs to provide evidence that they had thought through a number of instructional issues, such as "the ways in which distance learning in the fall will be different from and/or similar to the spring," how they would ensure "comparable levels of rigor between online and in-person instruction," and the means by which they would "assess [the] professional learning needs" of educators and other staff.[51] While all LEAs submitted reopening plans as required by RIDE, there was considerable diversity as to how school districts planned to accomplish the range of reopening scenarios. Likewise, there were differences among LEAs in the level of detail provided in response to information requested by RIDE.

The remainder of this section provides an analysis of school reopening across Rhode Island, providing a sense of what is occurring across public elementary and secondary education in the Ocean State and reporting the large differences across districts. In order to provide information in a digestible manner, the following analysis focuses solely on Rhode Island's 36 school districts, which are responsible for educating more than nine in ten public school students in the state, and excludes the state's five state-operated schools and collaboratives and 23 charter schools.[52]

RIPEC's district-by-district analysis focuses on four areas key to students' educational outcomes:

- In-person learning status as of October 13
- The nature of fully and/or partially remote student instruction
- Student access to technology

[50] RIDE, Back to School RI: Health and Safety Guidance to Reopen Rhode Island's Elementary and Secondary Schools, June 19, 2020.
[51] RIDE, LEA Reopening Planning Template, 2020.
[52] U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations.

- The availability of professional development for teaching distance learning

RIPEC has sourced its information in large part from district reopening plans, but also from communications from districts to students' families, the minutes of school board meetings, other publicly available materials, and outreach to both the districts and RIDE.

In-Person Learning Status, October 13

On July 29, before the deadline for school districts to submit reopening plans, Governor Raimondo announced that no students would be compelled to attend school in-person in the fall, essentially requiring that each school district provide distance learning to any student choosing to forego in-person instruction. In its guidance to LEAs, RIDE directed that they "determine a plan for high quality distance learning for students who are unable to return in-person, those that must remain home for short periods of time due to illness or quarantine, and those whose parents choose to keep them home for distance learning."[53]

Students were initially slated to return to school on August 31, but the administration, on August 10, announced a two-week delay. Citing the need among LEAs for "more time to put . . . plans in place" and "engage with . . . communities," RIDE updated the statewide calendar, providing for LEA-led professional development days for September 9 through 11 and for students to return on September 14.[54] On August 31, the governor gave the green light for reopening from a public health standpoint in all but two districts—Providence and Central Falls—where the weekly COVID-19 case ratio was consistently higher than state public health officials recommended in order to ensure a safe reopening.[55]

On August 31, the administration also set a new goal post for full reopening. As worded in an update from Commissioner Infante-Green, the state expressed its desire to be "patient and flexible" with LEA leaders who may "need time to stagger reopening over the first four weeks." The goal, however, was for all districts but Central Falls and Providence to "have all students who want to return in person back in their classrooms by October 13."[56]

---

[53] RIDE, Back to School RI: Health and Safety Guidance to Reopen Rhode Island's Elementary and Secondary Schools, updated August 25, 2020.
[54] RIDE, "Connected to Our Communities: Weekly Update from Commissioner Infante-Green," August 14, 2020; 2020/2021 Rhode Island School Calendar, August 12, 2020.
[55] The administration set out as a guideline that municipalities must have fewer than 100 cases per 1,000 residents for the district to be considered safe for full reopening on September 14. At that time, only Central Falls and Providence exceeded that infection rate. However, seven districts had 100 or more cases per 1,000 residents as of October 10: Narragansett, Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, North Providence, Foster, and Cranston. RIDE, "Proceeding with Care: An Update from Commissioner Infante-Green," August 31, 2020; RI Department of Health, COVID-19 Rhode Island Data, accessed October 15, 2020.
[56] RIDE, "Proceeding with Care: An Update from Commissioner Infante-Green," August 31, 2020.

Notwithstanding RIDE's position, only one in four—nine of 36—districts made full in-person instruction available to all students by October 13. Figure 5 outlines the in-person learning status of each district by grade and special population, as well as the district's student population based on the 2018-2019 school year. The nine school districts offering full in-person learning are exclusively in suburban and rural communities and collectively comprise only about ten percent of Rhode Island's public-school population.[57]

As of October 13, most Rhode Island districts were providing full in-person learning for some students and partial in-person learning for other students, but the proportion of students brought back on a full-time basis varies widely among districts. In Cumberland, fewer than five percent of all students have access to full in-person learning, compared to over two-thirds of the students in Tiverton, North Providence, and Scituate.[58]

Five districts in the state—Burrillville, Lincoln, North Smithfield, West Warwick, and Westerly—offered only partial in-person learning to their entire student body as of October 13. However, there are notable differences between these districts in the amount of in-person learning available.

Three districts in the state—Pawtucket, Warwick, and Woonsocket—were teaching a large portion of their student body remotely as of October 13, and in Pawtucket and Warwick most students were entirely remote. It is noteworthy that each of these districts is relatively large; Pawtucket, Warwick, and Woonsocket are respectively the third, fourth, and fifth largest districts in the state and collectively serve nearly one-fifth of all students in Rhode Island's public school districts.[59] Of additional importance—and concern, considering the scholarly consensus that distance education produces worse educational outcomes overall than a brick-and-mortar education—these districts are among the lowest performing in the state.[60]

As highlighted in Figure 5, school districts have prioritized in-person learning for students in lower grades, and many have prioritized in-person learning for students who are in special education classes or are multilingual learners, in recognition that distance learning poses a greater challenge

[57] U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] On the 2018 RICAS, Woonsocket and Pawtucket posted the second and fourth lowest proficiency rates among public school districts in the state in ELA and Literature. Similarly, on the Mathematics portion of the RICAS, Woonsocket tied with Providence for the second-lowest proficiency rate and Pawtucket ranked sixth lowest. While Warwick has fared better in standardized assessments than the other two districts, its proficiency rates on the last RICAS nevertheless ranked in the bottom third of Rhode Island districts (10th in ELA and Literature and 9th in Mathematics). Woonsocket, Pawtucket, and Warwick respectively achieved 14 percent, 24 percent, and 38 percent proficiency on the ELA/Lit portion of the RICAS. On the Mathematics portion, Woonsocket's proficiency rate was 12 percent, Pawtucket's was 18 percent, and Warwick's was 27 percent. RIDE, 2019 Statewide Assessment Results, Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS).

for certain student subgroups as compared to others. Each district made its own decisions in regard to what percentage of special populations to prioritize; some prioritized learning for all special education and/or MLL students while others prioritized only those students who learn in self-contained classrooms and are in need of the greatest level of assistance. Generally, districts were more likely to prioritize special education students than multilingual learners.

In total, about one-third of the students in Rhode Island's 36 districts had access to full in-person learning as of October 13, while approximately half had partial access to in-person learning, and about one-eighth had no in-person learning access. While these figures account for the fact that the extent to which a district is open differs by grade level, they do not account for those special education and/or MLL students with access to in-person learning.[61]

[61] Special education and MLL students were excluded from this calculation due to constraints in available data; namely, that many districts have given preferential access to some students who have IEPs and/or are MLL, but not the entirety of those student populations. It should be noted, however, that MLL and IEP populations make up a significant portion of Rhode Island's student population, respectively comprising an approximate one-tenth and one-fifth of all district students in the state. U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations.

Figure 5
Rhode Island School Reopening by District as of October 13, 2020

District	In-Person Learning Status by Grade, Special Populations	Student Population*
Barrington	Full in person PreK-6 & vulnerable populations Partial in person 7-12, two-three days per week	3,343
Bristol-Warren	Full in person PreK-5 Partial in person 6-8, two days per week Partial in person 9-12, one day per week	3,232
Burrillville	Partial in person PreK-5 & students with IEPs, four days per week Partial in person 6-12, one day per week	2,277
Central Falls	Full remote PreK-12 unless families opt-in to partial in person, two days per week Partial in person for special populations, four days per week	2,695
Chariho	Full in person	3,218
Coventry	Full in person PreK-5 & specialized special education & MLL classrooms Partial in person 6-12, two days per week	4,723
Cranston	Full in person PreK-1 & self-contained special education & MLL classrooms Partial in person 2-12, two days per week	10,479
Cumberland	Full in person PreK & self-contained special education classrooms Partial in person K-12, two days per week	4,675
East Greenwich[1]	Full in person K-5 & self-contained special education classrooms Partial in person PreK, four days per week Partial in person 6-12, two days per week	2,535
East Providence	Full in person PreK-5 Partial in person 6 & special populations, four days per week Partial in person 7-12, two days per week	5,262
Exeter-West Greenwich	Full in person PreK-5 & self-contained special education classrooms unless families opt-in to partial in person, two days per week Partial in person 6-12, two-three days per week	1,641
Foster^	Full in person unless families opt-in to partial in person, two days per week	272
Foster-Glocester[+]	Full in person unless families opt-in to partial in person, two days per week	1,306
Glocester^	Full in person	523
Jamestown[X]	Full in person	507
Johnston	Full in person self-contained special education classroom Partial in person PreK-5, four days per week Partial in-person 6-12, two days per week	3,265
Lincoln	Full in person self-contained special education classrooms Partial in person PreK-5, four days per week unless families opt-in to two days per week Partial in person 6-12, two days per week	3,129
Little Compton[X]	Full in person	244
Middletown	Full in person PreK-5 Partial in person 6-12, two days per week	2,153
Narragansett	Full in person PreK-8 Partial in-person 9-12, two-three days per week, unless families opt-in to full in person	1,290

District	In-Person Learning Status by Grade, Special Populations	Student Population*
New Shoreham	Full in person	133
Newport	Full in person PreK-4 & special education classrooms Partial in person 5-12, two days per week	2,156
North Kingstown	Full in person PreK-8 Partial in person 9-12, two-three days per week	4,007
North Providence[1]	Full in person PreK-8 Partial in person 9-12, two-three days per week	3,565
North Smithfield	Partial in person PreK-1 & self-contained special education classrooms, four days per week Partial in person 2-12, two days per week	1,677
Pawtucket	Full in person PreK-K & self-contained special education classrooms Remote 1-12	8,824
Portsmouth	Full in person PreK-4 & self-contained special education classrooms Partial in person 5-12, two days per week	2,439
Providence	Full in person PreK-5 & self-contained MLL & special education classrooms Partial in person 6-12, two-three days per week	23,955
Scituate	Full in person PreK-8 Partial in person 9-12, five days per week every other week	1,231
Smithfield	Full in person PreK-6 & some students with IEPs Partial in person, 7-12, two-three days per week	2,413
South Kingstown	Full in person	2,978
Tiverton[2]	Full in person K-5, 8-10 Partial in person 6-7 & 11-12, five days per week every other week	1,777
Warwick[3]	Partial in person PreK & self-contained special education classrooms, four days per week Partial in person K & career and technical center, two days per week Remote 1-12	8,800
West Warwick	Partial in person special populations, four days per week Partial in person PreK-12, two days per week	3,579
Westerly[4]	Partial in person PreK-4, 9, 12 & special education & MLL classrooms, four days per week Partial in person 5-8 & 10-11, two days per week	2,738
Woonsocket	Full in person PreK-K & self-contained special education & MLL classrooms Partial in person 1-8, two days per week Remote 9-12	6,050

* 2018-2019 school year

^ District serves PreK-5 populations only

+ District serves 6-12 populations only

X District serves PreK-8 populations only

[1] District plans to provide full in person for K-5 beginning on October 23

[1] 9-12 are quarantining from October 6 to October 19 due to COVID cases but will return part-time on October 20; district was fully reopen from September 14 to October 5

[2] District previously cited a plan to fully reopen by October 14 but has yet to do so

[3] District plans for students 1-5 to return part-time (two days per week) between October 20 and November 4

[4] District has cited a plan to "open more fully" on the week of October 30

Note: Families may choose for students to be fully remote in every district, but this figure only indicates the districts where parents may choose for students to be partially remote; MLL means multilingual learner; IEP means individualized education program

Sources: District reopening plans, communications with families and students, press reports, school committee meetings, & other publicly-available documents; U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019

Distance Learning

While the proportion of students learning at a distance varies greatly, every district in Rhode Island, including those that are fully reopen, is offering some form of distance learning as all LEAs were instructed to provide "high quality distance learning" for students who have to stay home because of health concerns or because their families chose to keep them home.[62] A significant percentage of distance learners can consequently be found across all districts. Statewide, a substantial proportion of families opted into full distance learning; according to a RIDE survey of districts conducted in early September, over one-in-four students across Rhode Island districts had families who chose the distance learning option at the beginning of the school year.[63]

In its distance learning guidance, RIDE recommended that educators design both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities for students, but also gave LEAs a relatively large degree of flexibility in determining the means through which they offered distance learning education.[64] Districts have consequently taken a variety of approaches. A number of districts—such as Barrington—are relying on live-streaming in-person courses for fully remote students, while others—such as South Kingstown—have stated plans to live-stream lessons, but also to use recorded lessons, digital breakout rooms, and/or one-on-one video conferencing to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous learning.[65] Whether or not a district is choosing to live-stream classes, most districts have developed plans for distance learning that provide some combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction.

However, it is notable that some districts are relying far more heavily on asynchronous instruction than others. Some families have expressed concern, for instance, that students enrolled in Providence's Virtual Learning Academy are receiving far less synchronous instruction than in the previous spring when the entire district was remote. This is particularly true for students at the high school level. Providence, which contracted with an outside vendor, Edgenuity, to help deliver online curriculum to students at the high school level, has assigned up to 200 high school students per teacher. At the elementary level in Providence's Virtual Learning Academy, the school district reportedly has assigned up to 52 students per teacher.[66]

---

[62] RIDE, "Back to School RI: Reopening Frequently Asked Questions, SY20-21," updated August 31, 2020.
[63] RIDE, September 2020 Survey of LEAs, "What percent of students in your LEA have chosen distance learning for the beginning of the year"; U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2018-2019; RIPEC calculations. There are no data available after September 11, but according to the observations of RIDE and the districts themselves, the number of families to choose distance learning has fallen as the fall semester has progressed.
[64] Ibid; RIDE, Distance Learning 2020, April 17, 2020.
[65] Barrington Public Schools, "Physical Health and Safety in 3 Phases of Teaching and Learning: Full, Partial, & Limited with Hybrid in Each Model," July 31, 2020; South Kingstown School Department, Initial Re-entry Design Plan, Version 2, July 31, 2020.
[66] Providence School Department, Virtual Learning Academy; Edgenuity; Steph Machado, "In one RI home, two virtual learning models are on display," October 7, 2020.

To some extent, it is difficult to ascertain the degree of difference in distance learning strategies employed by districts across the state, as some districts have provided more information to the public than others on their approach. For example, while Woonsocket has publicly confirmed only that both synchronous and asynchronous learning will occur, Coventry's "Distance Learning Blueprint" details how many hours of synchronous learning may occur daily, what synchronous learning will entail, what platforms will be utilized, by what time educators must distribute daily schedules, and that educators must provide daily office hours.[67]

A product of the decentralized governance of elementary and secondary education across the state as well as the practical realities of varying resources and reopening statuses across districts, the divergence in strategies used across Rhode Island public schools is nevertheless likely to result in varying student outcomes. There appears to be no clear consensus or consistency among Rhode Island schools regarding the most effective means of administering distance education.

Educational researchers have pointed to some best practices for distance learning. For instance, a meta-analysis of empirical literature from 2013 found that students learned best through online settings when provided with a mixture of expository, active, and interactive learning, while a 2018 study of virtual postsecondary education found that students identified the quality and promptness of teacher feedback as the most important component of a positive learning experience.[68] Citing these studies, among others, the authors of a recently published brief on "Improving the Quality of Distance and Blended Learning" suggest that educators devote much of their synchronous class time to "small-group peer interaction and direct teacher-to-student feedback." They additionally suggest that teachers shift to pedagogies such as the "flipped classroom model," in which students prepare for new skills by way of asynchronous exposition, test new skills during synchronous instruction, and then test knowledge asynchronously.[69]

Access to Technology

Educators and families in Rhode Island cited access to internet and/or devices as an obstacle to facilitating distance learning in the spring of 2020, particularly in districts with a higher proportion of low-income students. Many districts made efforts to rectify the issue by providing devices and internet hotspots to families. Philanthropic giving of over $400,000 helped students obtain access to internet and devices, while RIDE helped facilitate the distribution of charitable funds to needy

[67] Woonsocket Education Department, 2020-21 Reopening Plan; Coventry Public Schools, "Distance learning Blueprint," August 27, 2020.
[68] Barbara Means et. al., "The Effectiveness of Online and Blended Learning: A Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature," *Teachers College Record*, vol. 115, March 2013; Angela T. Ragusa & Andrea Crampton, "Sense of connection, identity and academic success in distance education: sociologically exploring online learning environments," May 11, 2018.
[69] H. Alix Gallagher & Benjamin Cottingham, "Improving the Quality of Distance and Blended Learning," EdResearch for Recovery, Brief 8, August 2020.

districts and additionally worked with internet providers to provide low-cost services to families in need.[70]

At a statewide level, RIDE recognized the need for districts to enhance students' access to technology in the fall. For example, RIDE has continued to provide information on obtaining internet hotspots through private commercial vendors to families and districts.[71] Additionally, RIDE's reopening template for the fall of 2020 instructed LEAs to "develop a return to school technology plan," "survey families to determine technology needs," and "develop processes for [the] inventory of technology."[72] Districts, however, provided a variant amount of specificity in their reopening plans as to how they would increase access to internet and devices.

In recognition that access to technologies is essential to distance learning, districts across the state worked towards increasing access to devices from the spring and into the summer. Nearly all districts in the state pledged either in their reopening plans or otherwise to provide devices to all students in need of them, if not to every student regardless of need. The exceptions were Central Falls and East Greenwich, which reported that devices were on backorder, and may not arrive in time for the beginning of the school year. Conversely, a few districts were already on a 1:1 device basis prior to the pandemic. According to RIDE, a survey of districts from August revealed that access to devices would be provided to all students in need in most districts, but that, in addition to the issue of backordered devices in a few districts, some districts expressed concern with the age and reliability of some portion of their devices.

Overall, district plans to increase internet connectivity among families are less clear than district plans pertaining to device procurement. At least 18 districts have stated plans to provide internet hotspots to students who need internet access, but the other half of Rhode Island's districts have either not made such plans or else have not publicized them. Most districts, moreover, did not make public their surveys on the technology needs of families, and it is consequently unclear how many families in each district, and across the state, lacked, and continue to lack, reliable access to the internet. According to RIDE, some of the districts surveyed in August expressed concern that they would not be able to provide an adequate number of hotspots to students in need of reliable internet access, but the extent of that need is unclear.

Professional Development

As with the question of how many students in the state continue to lack access to necessary technologies, it is unclear how many of the state's teachers are delivering distance learning without adequate professional development in virtual instruction. Namely, there is no statewide accounting

[70] Alexandra Leslie, "Nearly 70 donors contribute to RI Foundation's challenge grant to close remote learning gap," *WPRI*, April 29, 2020.
[71] RIDE, SY20-21 Student Internet Connectivity Options: District-Facing.
[72] RIDE, LEA Reopening Planning Template, 2020.

of how many public educators have undergone professional development in distance learning pedagogy, practices, and/or the virtual platforms utilized by districts to facilitate virtual education.

On a statewide level, RIDE has worked to facilitate professional development offerings to Rhode Island educators this fall, including offerings focused on distance learning.[73] RIDE additionally placed an onus on the districts to facilitate some professional development geared towards distance learning, instructing LEAs in the statewide reopening planning template to "assess [the] professional learning needs" of staff, "develop [a] professional development plan on curriculum implementation and instruction," and "provide training to staff . . . on how to access and use online services and resources."[74] Over the course of the 2020-2021 school year, districts across the state have the opportunity to deliver mandatory professional development to instructors on eight scheduled professional learning days. Three of those professional development days occurred the week before students returned to school (on September 9-11).[75]

While many (and perhaps all) districts chose to offer professional development experiences that centered on distance learning during the three professional development days in September—and many additionally offered such experiences during the spring and/or summer—there was no mandate that teachers receive professional development on distance learning, as opposed to other topics. It is therefore unclear how many educators in Rhode Island have received such training. Moreover, while some districts laid out in their reopening plans or elsewhere what professional development offerings they intended to, or had already, offered to educators, this information has not been shared for all districts.

RIDE has previously recognized that educators engaged in distance learning should receive the appropriate training; the guidance issued by RIDE in response to the Virtual Education Act of 2012 required teachers to be "knowledgeable in online instruction strategies and pedagogy."[76] That educators are able to best serve students if they receive professional development in distance learning is bolstered not only by RIDE's own guidance, but by independent researchers. A policy brief on improving the quality of distance and blended learning from Stanford University researchers, for instance, points out that "no teachers in the current workforce were educated using strong distance learning pedagogies" and that "experts interviewed about teacher learning for the current context stressed the importance of . . . providing professional development using . . . effective distance pedagogies."[77]

---

[73] RIDE, Professional Learning in RI: Reopening Schools 2020-21.
[74] RIDE, LEA Reopening Planning Template, 2020.
[75] RIDE, 2020/21 Rhode Island School Calendar, August 12, 2020.
[76] RIDE, Regulations of the Board of Regents Governing Virtual Learning Education in Rhode Island, 2012.
[77] H. Alix Gallagher & Benjamin Cottingham, "Improving the Quality of Distance and Blended Learning," EdResearch for Recovery, Brief 8, August 2020. Also see: Cathy G. Powell and Yasar Bodur, "Teachers' perceptions of an online professional development experience: Implications for a design and implementation framework," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 77 (January 2019): pp. 19-30; Micah Castelo, "How to Prepare and Support Educators Teaching from Home," *EdTech*, April 14, 2020; Bree Dusseault, Georgia Heyward, and Travis Pillow,

VI. RIPEC Comments

When analyzing school reopening and distance learning for Rhode Island's public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to bear in mind that we are in the midst of a public health emergency that has claimed the lives of more than one thousand Rhode Islanders and has upended most of our normal human activities.[78] Rhode Island teachers and school staff have legitimate concerns for their own personal safety and for the safety of their families. While many parents clamored for schools to be reopened, a large proportion of parents decided against sending their children to school. To reopen, public schools were required to adhere to stringent restrictions on maximum gatherings, social distancing, bus passenger limits, and disinfection protocols, while at the same time offering distance learning to all students whose families requested it. In many school districts, facilities are not easily adapted to these public health requirements, and some districts suffer from deficiencies in staffing and resources that increase the degree of difficulty in reopening schools.

Without ignoring or minimizing the considerable challenges presented by the pandemic, at the same time, public education is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of state and local government. Rhode Island taxpayers spend over $2 billion per year on their public schools, and the elementary and secondary education of young Rhode Islanders is a matter of critical importance to the lives of those students and to the future prosperity of our state.[79] The quality and equity of K-12 instruction, and of student outcomes, should be matters of great public concern, even during the pandemic.

There are several takeaways from RIPEC's analysis that inform its short- and long-term policy recommendations.

First, recognizing that in-person instruction generally results in better student outcomes, it is troubling that the school districts offering the most in-person instruction are in higher-income suburban and rural communities, while urban schools in lower-income communities are among those offering the least in-person instruction. As the school year continues, policymakers and school leaders should seek to expand in-person instruction throughout the state, so that lower-income students can receive the same educational benefits as their higher-income counterparts. To the extent additional funding is needed to advance in-person instruction, policymakers should seek to appropriate additional CARES Act funding or reprogram other funds for this purpose.

"More districts should seize the opportunity to improve professional learning for teachers," Center for Reinventing Public Education, September 25, 2020; Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, Melissa Diliberti, "Teaching and Leading Through a Pandemic: Key Findings from the American Educator Panels Spring 2020 COVID-19 Surveys," Rand Institute, 2020.

[78] RI Department of Health, RI COVID-19 Response Data, accessed October 13, 2020.

[79] U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 State & Local Government Finance Historical Datasets and Tables.

Second, there were troubling disparities in access to technology in the spring, with a sizable minority of children left without 1:1 access to devices or internet access. Obviously, distance learning cannot be effective without a connection between students and instruction. For the fall, it appears that school districts have improved access to devices, with nearly all districts offering devices to students who need them. However, internet access does not appear to have received the same attention from districts, and such access may be an issue in some districts. In any case, technological access remains an area of critical importance. Policymakers should require a statewide accounting to identify any gaps in student access to technology and should ensure that every student has access to a suitable device and broadband.

Third, while distance learning generally produces inferior educational outcomes to in-person instruction, where distance learning must be employed, such instruction should reflect best practices and should be delivered by instructors trained in remote instruction. According to academic studies and RIDE's own guidance, distance learning is best when delivered as a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. While some school districts have adopted best practice methods of delivering distance learning, there is a wide variety of approaches throughout school districts in Rhode Island. In some districts, distance learning consists of live streaming the classroom instructional experience. In other districts, students receive instruction that offers little in the way of live interaction with an instructor. If possible, educational leaders should seek to modify distance learning methods to better align with best practices. Also, while many Rhode Island educators have received training in distance learning, such training should be mandatory for all educators engaged in delivering remote instruction.

Fourth, while understandable that the focus and attention of RIDE and the school districts have been directed to addressing the public health and educational challenges of reopening and distance learning, there is a compelling need for more transparency and information regarding key elements of public school operations during the pandemic. To make improvements, respond to gaps, and ensure some level of accountability, it is critical that policymakers and the public have useful and current information on a range of key questions, such as:

- How many students are receiving in-person instruction and for how many days per week?
- How many students do not have access to technology?
- What is the student attendance rate, and how is attendance being measured, by school and district?
- How many hours of synchronous instruction are remote learners receiving each day?
- Of those teachers delivering remote learning, how many have received professional development in remote instruction?
- What has been the impact of remote learning on student outcomes?

This information should be compiled on a statewide basis, but also by LEA and school, as well as by subgroups distinguished by language, race/ethnicity, income-level, and IEP status.

Longer term, policymakers should work to enable Rhode Island public schools to build proficiency in distance learning. Despite the growing interest and adoption of technology in many schools in recent years, Rhode Island's public schools had little to no experience with distance learning and were greatly challenged to implement distance learning instruction on short notice. Despite the passage of the Rhode Island Virtual Education Act in 2012 and RIDE's regulatory direction that school districts adopt virtual learning policies, there appears to have been little advancement in virtual learning on a statewide level prior to the pandemic.

Finally, the decentralized structure of Rhode Island's public education system essentially preordained that our schools would struggle to respond to a major challenge of the kind presented by the pandemic. While the state Council on Elementary and Secondary Education and Department of Education are authorized to oversee elementary and secondary education, the state's power over the instructional operations of schools is limited. This limitation was perhaps no better demonstrated than by the response by most school districts to essentially reject the directive by the governor and RIDE to reopen schools by October 13. Moreover, while RIDE issued guidance and advice on reopening and distance learning, and required reopening plans from every LEA, the actual mechanics of reopening and distance learning were largely left to the educational leaders, school committees, and governing boards in 36 different school districts, 23 charter schools, and five state schools. Because of our system of local control, and our lack of common curriculum, Rhode Island, despite its small size, was largely unable to take advantage of efficiencies of delivering effective distance learning instruction across school districts. Once this pandemic is behind us, there needs to be a larger discussion as to whether this current model delivers the best outcomes for all students.