School Districts across the Nation Plan for an Uncertain Year Ahead

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As the homepage of any local newspaper will tell you, school reopening plans are changing quickly as the spread of COVID-19 shifts in different communities, and as state, local, and federal health guidance responds. New data from a nationally representative sample shows that, as of July 31st, slightly over half of school districts are planning on reopening with some in-person learning, but that districts are hard at work planning for multiple contingencies for learning depending on COVID-19 spread.

Earlier this summer CRPE released data from a sample of 477 districts that provide statistical representation of all school districts across the country. This past week, we returned to that sample to get a more comprehensive look at how school districts are planning to return to school in the fall by reviewing district websites, social media, and local news. This sample includes most of the large school districts that CRPE has tracked on a weekly basis through the COVID-19 pandemic, but also includes 399 additional districts. We apply statistical weights to provide a nationally representative sample of U.S. school districts. With this sample, we are able to compare planned COVID-19 responses in different types of communities and with different student characteristics.

Even by the time this brief is published, the numbers here will likely have changed somewhat. In order to "time stamp" the data presented here, we coded the fall 2020 reopening communications from our sample during the week of July 27-31. This data gives us a snapshot of how school districts across the country are currently planning for fall 2020, how they are planning for contingencies of COVID-19 spread, and how this varies based on district characteristics.

Most School Districts Are Planning to Return to At Least Partially In-Person—But Many Are Undecided

As of July 31st, 51 percent of school districts plan to provide in-person learning either full-time or part-time through a "hybrid" model of in-person and remote learning. In contrast with the most recent blog post from the large district database, only 14 percent of school districts across the country had announced plans to begin the school year with remote instruction.

Perhaps in acknowledgement of the constantly changing guidance and realities, over one third of school districts had still not announced how they planned to restart schools. But this does not necessarily mean that districts are not hard at work planning. Twenty-four percent of districts have mapped out operational plans, but have still not made a decision on reopening, while 10 percent offered no public information on fall planning. About 80 percent of school districts had provided at least some details for how school might operate either fully in-person, in a hybrid model, or fully remotely—and almost one third have designed plans for all three contingencies. Sixty-nine percent of school districts have created a plan for a remote learning if needed.
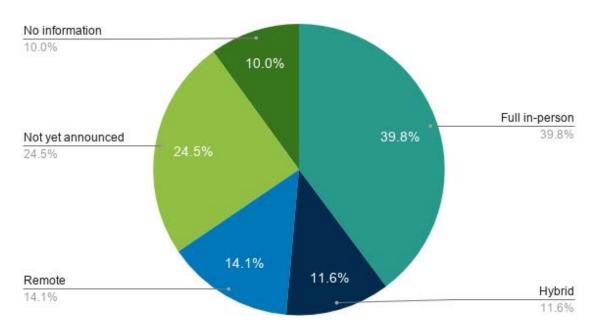
Figure 1. District Recommendation for Start-of-Year Learning Model

Currently Announced Plans Vary Significantly by District Locale

The data for all school districts hides very different plans based on district locale. Over 50 percent of urban school districts are currently planning on starting the year fully remote, while only 4 percent of rural districts have made that decision.

This difference in plans likely aligns with virus activity, and may be related to the facility capacity in rural areas to support recommended social distancing. However, a much larger proportion of rural districts had still not announced their reopening plan as the last week of July. This may reflect reluctance to shift back to remote learning, which we know from our prior research was more challenging for rural districts than for their urban and suburban peers.
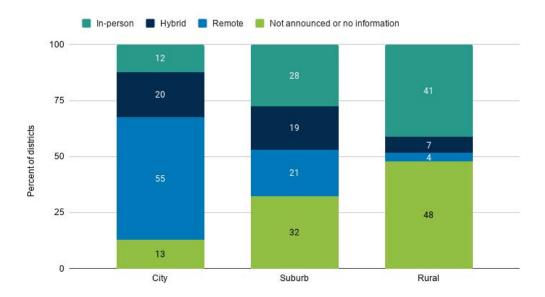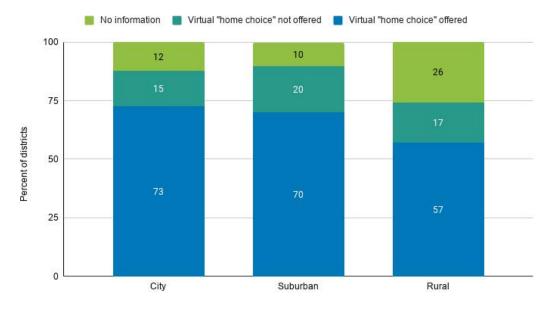
Figure 2. District Recommendation for Start-of-Year Learning Model

Legend: In-person | Hybrid | Remote | Not announced or no information

Locale	In-person	Hybrid	Remote	Not announced or no information
City	12	20	55	13
Suburb	28	19	21	32
Rural	41	7	4	48

Y-axis: Percent of districts

A Majority of School Districts Will Offer Families the Opportunity to Choose Remote Learning

Many families have expressed that they want the option of attending school virtually, regardless of the official district announcement or local health guidance. Based on our national data, many school districts have listened: a majority plan to offer a virtual "home choice" option that families can opt into, typically for at least the first quarter or semester.

A majority of all school districts in all locales will offer this option, but it is more common in urban and suburban school districts.

Figure 3. District Recommendation for Start-of-Year Learning Model

Legend: No information | Virtual "home choice" not offered | Virtual "home choice" offered

Locale	No information	Virtual "home choice" not offered	Virtual "home choice" offered
City	12	15	73
Suburban	10	20	70
Rural	26	17	57

Y-axis: Percent of districts

As noted above, this data provides only a snapshot. Unfortunately, COVID-19 hotspots continue to flare and subside in many communities, making any certainty difficult for district leaders. It is heartening to know that so many districts have developed plans with multiple contingencies, including more proactive and robust plans for remote learning than we saw last spring. At the same time, parents need to know very soon what their children will be doing at the start of the year. Either states must step forward with an affirmative set of conditions and guidelines for what reopening should look like, or districts must fill this leadership vacuum themselves.

Appendix A. Full Data Tables

| | | By percent poverty quartile | | | | By locale (See note 2) | | |
	All	Quartile 1 (0 - 9.7% poverty)	Quartile 2 (9.7 - 15.8% poverty)	Quartile 3 (15.8 - 22.7% poverty)	Quartile 4 (22.7+% poverty)	City 12.5%	Rural 65.4%	Suburb 22.2%
		Weighted Percentage				Weighted Percentage		
Currently planned start-of-year mode of instruction								
In-person	39.8	34	46.6	39.2	33.5	12.7	47.7	32.2
Hybrid	11.6	14.9	11.8	10.5	10.2	20.1	7.3	19.4
Remote	14.1	9.9	9.5	17	20.2	54.9	3.9	20.9
To be announced	24.5	30.5	23.3	21.1	28	8.4	29.1	20.4
No information	10.0	10.6	8.9	12.3	8.1	3.9	12.1	7.2
District provides information on plans for fully in-person learning model								
Yes	63.8	63.4	70.8	65	52.3	61	63.2	67
No	16.4	16.4	14.5	14.7	21.3	26.1	12.5	22.6
No information	19.8	20.2	14.7	20.3	26.5	12.9	24.4	10.4
District provides information on plans for a hybrid learning model								
Yes	41.0	61.4	38.1	36	29.4	56	31.5	60.4
No	38.4	18.4	44	43.7	45	32.6	42.6	29.2
No information	20.6	20.2	17.9	20.3	25.7	11.4	25.6	10.4
District provides information on plans for fully remote learning model								
Yes	69.4	73.5	70.5	76.3	57.3	83.5	61.9	83.4
No	11.2	6	11.8	8.2	17.3	6.1	13.4	7.8
No information	19.4	20.5	17.7	15.5	25.4	10.3	24.7	8.8
Districts have planned for all three possible models								
Yes	32.0	49	31.2	27	20.8	38.3	25.4	47.6
No	68.0	51	68.8	73	79.2	61.6	74.6	52.4
District will offer a "home choice" virtual option								
Yes	61.9	63.7	59.4	72	52.4	72.5	57	70.2
No	17.6	15.8	22.6	8.8	21.5	15.3	17.4	19.6
No information	20.5	20.5	17.9	19.2	26.1	12.2	25.7	10.1
District signals that they will prioritize certain groups of students for in-person instruction, if possible								
Yes	15.1	19.3	14.4	12.9	11.9	22.1	11.6	21.6
No	63.7	59.9	67.7	65.9	61.6	63.4	62.4	68
No information	15.1	20.8	17.9	21.2	26.5	14.5	26.1	10.4

Sample includes 477 school districts weighted to provide nationally representative sample.

Results are reported as % of group and reflect weighted frequency.

Note on City, Rural, Suburban configuration:

All NCES codes for City (11 - Large, 12 - Midsize, and 13 - Small) are collapsed to "city."

All NCES codes for Suburban (21 - Large, 22 - Midsize, 23 - Small) are collapsed to "suburb."

All NCES codes for "Town" and " Rural" (31 - Town, Fringe; 32 - Town, Distant; 33 - Town, Remote; and 41 - Rural, Fringe; 42 - Rural, Distant; and 43 - Rural, Remote) are collapsed to "rural."

Note on "No closure information found":

We report a district as "no information found" when we fail to find any web-based public information on the district, or any reference to COVID-19 or coronavirus school closures on the district's website, Facebook page, or Twitter account. We chose to include "no information" districts in all of our analyses because we feel the lack of easy-to-access public information is a salient concern amid the closures.

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Appendix B. Code Definitions

Indicator	Measure	Definition
Start-of-year anticipated learning mode	Hybrid In-person Remote TBA No information	In-person = Schools open with only in-person instruction (no virtual/remote instruction) for at least one grade band Remote = Schools open with only virtual/remote instruction (no in-person instruction) for at least one grade band Hybrid = Schools open with some combination of in-person and virtual/remote instruction for at least one grade band TBA = To be announced. District indicates that a decision about reopening will be made in the coming weeks, and does not yet provide information on what is the most likely scenario No information = No information about COVID-19 related to fall 2020 planning can be found
Notes if not all grades	Free response	Any notes if the 'start of year' plan is not consistent across all grade levels
District provides detail for **fully in-person** learning scenario	Yes No No information	In-person is defined as only in-person learning (no remote) Yes = District provides a description of the learning scenario, such as schedule, when it will be in use, etc. No = District does not reference or provide description of learning scenario No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning
District provides detail for **fully remote** learning scenario	Yes No No information	Remote is defined as only remote learning (no in-person) Yes = District provides a description of the learning scenario, such as schedule, when it will be in use, etc. No = District does not reference or provide description of learning scenario No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning
District provides detail for **hybrid** learning scenario	Yes No No information	Hybrid is defined as blend of in-person and remote learning Yes = District provides a description of the learning scenario, such as schedule, when it will be in use, etc. No = District does not reference or provide description of learning scenario No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning
District provides full-time remote "home choice" option	Yes No No information	Yes = District provides full-time remote learning option for students, such as virtual academy No = District does not reference a provide full-time remote learning option No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning
District prioritizes certain student groups for in-person instruction	Yes No No information	Yes = Certain groups of students will receive in-person instruction (e.g., students with IEPs, elementary students, etc.) No = All students will receive in-person instruction, or no students will receive in-person instruction No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning
Explanation of priority	Free response	For example, elementary students will be in-person, all other students remote Students with disabilities and English language learners are encouraged to choose in-person options

Appendix C. Methodology

1. Description of the Project

The COVID-19 response database tracks how a nationally representative group of school districts responded to the COVID-19 school closures in spring 2020. The goal of this effort is to capture a national portrait of how school districts are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic on an ongoing basis. Our sample includes 477 school districts, sampled and weighed to reflect a representative cross-section of school districts across the U.S.

Prior analyses have tracked how these school districts provided remote instruction during the spring 2020 school closures. For this iteration of the project, we collected and coded publicly available information about how the school district was currently planning to reopen schools, as well as the ways that the district was planning for various contingencies related to the spread of COVID-19.

We merged the coded data with descriptive information on each district, such as percent of poverty in the school district, racial demographics, and locale description, from the National Center on Education Statistics Common Core of Data.

This project is a collaboration with RAND Corporation, and stems from the ongoing American School District Panel project, a project intended to build a nationally representative panel of American School Districts.

2. Sources Accessed for Information

For each school district, we coded the indicators based on publicly available information. Primary sources were the school district website, local news reports, and social media (district Facebook pages or Twitter, YouTube). In total we found no plans for fall reopening on the district's website or social media feeds for 33 of the sampled districts. We coded these districts as "no information." For the vast majority of school districts, school reopening information was centered on the district website, or was referenced on local news. So, while there may be information communicated to families directly on reopening, given the current prominence of reopening in public discourse and parent need, we believe we captured the majority of plans available during the last week of July 2020.

We gathered descriptive information from the school districts (enrollment, racial demographics, percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, locale code) from the National Center for Education Statistics, based on 2016 data.

We also categorized districts based on the percent of families in poverty in the surrounding community. This data was provided by Market Data Retrieval (MDR), and their data guide offers the following information on sourcing: "The poverty data is sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates program, which provides annual estimates of income and poverty statistics for all states, counties, and school districts. The poverty percentage identifies districts and public schools by the actual percentage of children in the district that come from families below the poverty line. The poverty line is determined by a formula (Orshansky Indicator) based on family income and size. The poverty percentage field was calculated by MDR by creating a ratio of the children in a district from families below the poverty line to all children in the district." (MDR Data Dictionary, 2020).

3. Coder Training

The coding team was consistent from the spring 2020 coding to the fall planning coding. In onboarding, coders participated in several training and norming activities, including: (1) all coders reviewed a codebook outlining definitions for codes in the various fields of interest, (2) all coders reviewed information from districts, then coded a common sample of four districts, then met to discuss alignment and misalignment, (3) all inexperienced coders were paired with an experienced coder who would check their codes against the correct coding for the four districts, and discuss any discrepancies, and (4) all coders participated in multiple alignment sessions in which they discussed coding questions and further aligned on code definitions.

4. Data Collection Timeline

We collected all data on the 477 districts during the week of July 27-31, 2020. Some districts during this week had announced that they would release plans in the following weeks. In this case, we coded for whatever information was available, and "To Be Announced" for the start-of-year learning mode.

5. Code Definitions

Appendix A is the codebook used for fall plan coding. For all indicators, codes were based only on publicly available information, and when there was no information available, were coded "no information."

For the "start-of-year anticipated learning mode," if a district provided plans on how learning might look but had not yet announced which option would be chosen, we coded "TBA," or to be announced. If a district had announced how they intended to start the school year, but had released no other information on operational planning for other contingencies, we would code for the announced plan, but "no information" for the in-person, hybrid, or remote learning scenario indicators.

6. Explanation of the Sample and Sample Calibration

The Sample

The national sample includes two groups of districts.

Group 1 includes 399 districts and is a stratified random sample from a sample of 1,200 school districts. The 1,200 school districts represent the recruitment sample for the RAND-led American School District Panel project, a project intended to build a nationally representative panel of American School Districts. The sample of 399 districts is stratified by school location and includes 200 small-town and rural districts and 199 suburban and urban districts.

Group 2 includes the 82 urban districts CRPE began collecting district response data in March 2020. CRPE updated data on these districts weekly from March 28, 2020, through July 31, 2020. Data from this group was taken from the last update of this set on July 29, 2020.

Because 3 of the 82 large urban districts also appear among the 399 districts, and one is in Canada, the total national sample includes 477 U.S. school districts.

Calibration and Sample Weights

Excluding the duplicates, we combined the Group 1 and Group 2 districts and then calibrated to reflect the national population of school districts along 10 factors:

- Total enrollment in the district split into three groups: Small [0-800], medium [800-3000] and Large [3000+]

- Total number of schools in the district split into three groups: 1, [2-5], and [6+]

- Per-pupil expenditure on instructional materials

- Current expenditure dollar range code represents per-student current expenditures within ranges and are maintained on district (except Supervisory Union) and public school records

- Percentage of minority students in the district split into four groups [0-15%], [15-25%], [25-50%], and [50%+]

- Percentage of poverty-level students in the district split into four groups [0-10%], [10-15%], [15-25%], and [25%+]

- Percentage of students in the district eligible for free / reduced-price lunch split into four groups [0-25%], [25-50%], [50-75%], and [75%+]

- The specific level of instruction in the school district, Elementary, Secondary or Unified

- The percentage of special education students in the district split into [0-12%], [12-17%], and [17%+]

- Bilingual Education Indicator that indicates if Bilingual Education is offered [Yes/No]

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