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A Year That Forced Change: Examining How Schools and School Systems Adapted to the Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Calls for Racial Justice in 2020

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Overview

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 virus shuttered schools across the country and world and calls for racial justice expanded into nearly every sphere of social and political life as the nation reeled at another life violently taken at the hands of a police officer. School system leaders faced difficult decisions about delivering instruction while maintaining the safety and well-being of students, families, faculty, and staff. Moreover, the spotlight on racial injustice also drew attention to the need for educational reform to better serve historically marginalized students with academic, social, emotional, and other special needs.

This research explores how educational institutions and their systems responded to two sudden disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic and increased awareness of racial inequity. We compared responses from traditional, charter, voucher-receiving private schools and rural and urban districts. Our findings were based on 68 interviews with district, school, and community leaders and 46 interviews with parents, plus website, social media, and document analysis across four states and Washington, DC. Key findings are as follows:

- In the sites included in our study, school responses to COVID were broadly similar across sectors, particularly at the start of the pandemic. We also found more similarities than differences when comparing traditional public and charter schools' responses to heightened attention to racial injustice.

- We found variations in response to calls for racial justice, as some schools and school systems acted in more symbolic ways (e.g., issuing statements, hosting protests or marches), while some responded with more substantive actions that worked to bring about equitable conditions (e.g., policy changes, increased organizational learning/training), and others responded with a combination of symbolic and substantive actions.
- Schools are situated in community contexts, influencing how schools and systems make decisions about their crisis response, learn from these responses, and determine whether their actions were effective. In our study's schools, responses to COVID and calls for racial justice were driven largely by political and geographic contexts.
    - Where we saw variation in pandemic responses across localities (e.g., decisions to reopen schools for in-person learning), respondents indicated it was driven by political dynamics (e.g., state policy requirements, teacher union strength), prior governance structures (e.g., partnerships between district and charter schools), changes in competitive pressures, and geographic contexts (e.g., differences driven by urbanicity or rurality).
    - Liberal areas in our sample showed greater fluency in racial justice topics than in the conservative districts. Urban districts in our sample had prior experience with equity work and were proactive in responding to calls for racial justice. In contrast, the rural districts in our sample were generally more reactive.
    - Parents on average were generally satisfied with their schools during COVID-19, with some groups of parents expressing particularly high levels of satisfaction: parents in private schools, those with higher incomes, those with kids learning in person, and those residing in Florida.

While COVID and calls for racial justice that expanded in 2020 were significant shocks to educational organizations, it is clear that these are not isolated events and that more crises are likely to come. During this study, we witnessed hurricanes, wildfires, and an insurrection at the U.S. capitol. As such, it is essential to understand how schools and systems respond to pivotal events so we can design effective strategies to support students and educators/staff during such events that occur in the future.

Background

In recent years, schools and school systems have faced unprecedented challenges with the COVID pandemic and call for racial justice, sparking nationwide attention on how leaders respond, what factors influence these responses, and whether the choices made will exacerbate or alleviate existing educational inequities.

Prior REACH research examines how America's schools responded to the COVID pandemic, what factors predicted schools' decisions about remote learning, and what parents thought about schools' responses to COVID and calls for racial justice. This study extends this line of work by examining whether different sectors (e.g., traditional public, charter) responded differently to these crises and why these differences and similarities exist.

Given that the promise of school choice is increased autonomy for education leaders, there are many reasons to expect that charter schools could respond differently and more nimbly in a crisis. Charter schools

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often control where they are located, who they hire, and their specific program offerings so they can focus on different practices in different contexts more easily. However, this increased autonomy can sometimes come alongside limited networks and resources (particularly for standalone charter schools, in contrast to charter management organizations that operate multiple schools), inhibiting charters' capacity to respond. Charter schools may also be more responsive, driven by parents whose actions may trigger changes in enrollment and, thus, resources.

With this in mind, we designed a study to answer the following questions in a purposeful sample of 7 districts and 18 schools from both urban and rural settings in 4 states (Colorado, Louisiana, Michigan, and Oregon) and Washington, D.C.:

- How did educational institutions respond to COVID? What measures, if any, were taken in light of the heightened attention on racial injustice?
- What broader themes were revealed from schools' reactions to the COVID pandemic and pleas to improve racial equality?
- What factors shaped schools' responses to COVID and calls for racial justice?

We studied five large urban districts (Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, Portland, and Washington, D.C.) and three rural districts in Oregon and Michigan, with various charter school and voucher policies. These districts provided variation in governance and choice.

Our analysis of schools and school systems' responses to COVID takes a comparative approach, examining contextual and organizational factors to account for response differences. We explored districts' capabilities, resources, and external factors like economics or civic capacity. We considered school systems' decision-making processes and conditions and interviewed leaders in schools, community-based organizations, public health officials, policymakers, and advocates.

We conducted interviews and follow-up analysis over the first 16 months of the pandemic to understand how different organizations initially reacted to the pandemic and race-related issues, and what learning methods were developed. We also asked how leaders and organizations would adapt to future crises.

It is important to note that our results draw from limited data from a small number of schools. We aim to help contextualize and explain school responses during the pandemic by exploring the role of various conditions, not to make causal claims or represent entire sectors or localities.

How Did Schools Respond to COVID and Calls for Racial Justice?

Responses to COVID

We found that schools across localities and sectors faced similar issues and responded similarly to COVID. In particular, we saw similar responses from districts and schools, across sectors in several key decision areas (Figure 1).

We examined schools' and school systems' responses to calls for racial justice and found three primary approaches: symbolic responses, substantive responses, and both symbolic and substantive.

Symbolic Policy Responses to Calls for Racial Justice. We saw examples of symbolic policy responses across sectors. Many traditional and charter schools alike issued statements condemning racist behaviors and affirming the worth of students and individuals broadly of all racial backgrounds. Some also attended or hosted protests and marches. Actions such as solidarity statements, protests, and marches signal to onlookers—and perhaps the actors themselves—that the participants value racial equity and justice.

Figure 1. Similarities and Differences in Responses across sectors in our Study Sample for Key Decision Areas

Key Decision Area	Similar Response across sectors in our Study Sample	Different Responses across sectors in our Study Sample
Family Support (meals, healthcare support)	Provision of meals	The two small private schools in our study tried but struggled to provide services.
Technology	Technology distribution, including laptops and mobile hotspots	Some sites had to fundraise or partner with other organizations to meet students' tech needs The two private schools in our sample noted a lack of resources but adapted virtual platforms to meet curriculum needs, even with funding constraints
Learning and Assessment	State and district accountability and assessment pressures eased for charter and traditional public schools	District leaders reimagined assessments, de-emphasizing standardized tests. Traditional public school and charter leaders shared concerns that the easing of pressures would lead to consequences in coming years and remained focused on improving outcomes as measured by assessments.
Staffing and Human Resources	Professional development for teachers related to virtual learning	Some charter schools overstaffed or created substitute banks to ensure staffing needs were met in the face of teacher shortages. One rural TPS provided onsite childcare.
Social-emotional Learning	Mental health resources, wellness checks, and home visits	More charters in our sample had social-emotional learning embedded in their core academics prior to the pandemic than TPS did.
Transportation	Little demand initially, as most students were learning from home.	Charter leaders had to secure new bussing contracts to provide hybrid instruction. Differences in how transportation was coordinated and the extent of partnership between districts and charter schools.
Modality	Most cases were closed to in-person instruction in the spring of 2020 and began to fall 2020 remotely. Most charter schools described following the lead of TPSs. By spring 2021, all districts provided some degree of parent choice in modality.	Some charters reopened for in-person instruction earlier, in the fall of 2020, compared to traditional public schools.
Information Provided to Families	Emphasis on frequent communications about COVID rates and protocols.	District leaders relied extensively on one-way electronic communications. Charter schools more often fielded family surveys to engage parents and inform decisions around reopening.

Substantive Policy Responses to Calls for Racial Justice. We saw concrete action from institutions in several areas. In response to calls for racial justice after George Floyd was murdered, Denver Public Schools and Portland Public Schools ended their programs that employed personnel as school resource officers. They explained that their choice was a step toward fairness in school discipline and security. One district leader in Denver noted the constraints around substantive racial equity work, even in a liberal city. These constraints necessitated years of persistence by community organizers and district leaders. This respondent viewed the district's response as a window of opportunity to advance long-held goals, which sharply contrasted with critiques that the response was impulsive.

In the charter schools in our sample specifically, charter leaders—from both standalone and networked schools—also made some material policy commitments. One standalone charter school in rural Michigan committed to a multi-year plan for professional development and culturally responsive curriculum development. Both district and charter leaders opted to implement new policies and adjust operations to use school and district resources more equitably.

A Nuanced Relationship Between Symbolic and Substantive Policy Responses. The symbolic-substantive divide is not moral; it doesn't go from bad to good. For instance, a union representative in Detroit remarked that observing a Muslim holiday was significant even if it did not change anything materially; the fact that it was observed and honored showed acknowledgment of the people who practice that faith. Additionally, some responses we observed straddle the line between symbolic and substantive in that, the actions do not have material consequences but could if acted upon.

Notably, interviewees who spoke of symbolic and substantive actions in response to racial injustice indicated that these efforts received pushback. Though school system leaders might view symbolic actions as a type of "soft entry" into racial equity work, this pattern in our data suggests that even soft entry points are likely to receive some opposition.

What Broader Themes Were Identified in Schools' Responses to COVID and Calls for Racial Justice?

Anticipating the Crisis. We found that anticipation was a key element in how schools and school systems in our study handled the early part of the pandemic. With the pandemic, most school systems grasped that a crisis was taking place at roughly the same time. Still the ways that they anticipated how the pandemic would impact operations—and the resources devoted to planning for this potential future—were different across sites and appeared to be primarily related to leadership capacity. Anticipation was less present in responses to calls for racial justice. However, as we describe further below, we did find that prior professional learning and development on concepts of equity mattered for how school systems responded to racial injustice awareness.

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Collaboration, Centralization, and Autonomy. Schools and districts made monumental efforts to support their communities during the pandemic, often with an approach that blended collaboration and centralization across sectors. They found ways to share resources and guidance on online learning and food delivery. More centralized moves included decisions about health safety, communication, and transportation. This coordination aimed to improve systems and communications for students and families to ensure equity in access to services, learning,

and technology. As one New Orleans system leader said: "You may enjoy your daily 'power,' but in the case of an emergency, it's more beneficial for everyone, especially the students and families that we serve, to acquiesce your power to one authority to actually be able to guide a whole system of schools through one singular event."

Prior governance structures and past experiences with cross- and within-sector collaboration strongly influenced whether charters and districts partnered in some way during the crisis. Detroit and New Orleans are useful cases of comparison, given their high numbers of charters but different histories with school coordination. Although both cities have decentralized school choice systems, in which charters operate autonomously and there is limited centralized decision-making across all schools, differences were seen in the level of coordination during the pandemic. During the pandemic, there was no centralization across the TPS and charter sectors in Detroit, and the only dimension of cross-sector coordination we recorded was that the Detroit TPS system offered free meals to all families, including those with students enrolled in charters. Although leaders made similar decisions regarding online learning and health protocols, we found no evidence of centralized decision-making or formal communication between Detroit charter and TPS leaders. In contrast, leaders in New Orleans had a highly coordinated response to the COVID crisis—which may relate to prior organizational structures and governance arrangements. Although New Orleans is largely a decentralized all-charter system, prior experience and a history of centralized policies, including a citywide enrollment process, may have contributed to the coordination during COVID.

Charter schools took advantage of their autonomy to respond to calls for racial justice, resulting in more within-district variety between schools in the charter sector than in traditional public schools. Still, across the sites, the type and range of responses we observed in charter sectors were similar to those in traditional sectors. Similar symbolic and structural responses were present in both sectors—from protests to professional learning to restructuring police partnerships. Overall, autonomy mattered for how much variety was present at the district level; yet autonomy seemed to matter less for overall variety between sectors across sites. The primary point of distinction between the two is that traditional public school response tended to align with district-wide solutions. In contrast, charter school leaders had more freedom to make policy changes without district approval.

Regardless of the charter type (CMO, standalone) or the district context (portfolio model, all-charter district, urban, rural), greater autonomy allowed charter schools to react to racial injustice in ways parallel to their respective districts but not necessarily in tandem with them. Though both sectors were advancing efforts centered on racial equity and justice, the efforts themselves varied. For example, in D.C., the charter board was in its third year of the "DEI journey," which intensified after the 2020 protests, leading them to assess the fairness of their school choice enrollment systems. At the same time, the district was giving social justice programming to DCPS parents. Though both sectors made efforts regarding racial equity and justice, their approaches differed.

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In general, we observed similar responses to calls for racial justice from both sectors, from protests to learning opportunities to restructuring police partnerships. Ultimately, greater autonomy allowed charters to have a wider range of school-level responses than traditional public schools; however, neither the traditional nor charter sectors in our sample favored one response over the other.

Top-Down Orientation. In examining racial equity work, we found a top-down orientation to enacting change across traditional public and charter school sectors with limited community collaboration from leaders. Although virtually every participant from every school system acknowledged the need to focus on racial injustice in some form,

only one school system mentioned partnering with communities or community advocacy groups as it formed its responses to racial injustice. While leaders may have seen the need to act quickly in the face of escalating protests and pressure, precluding a more participatory process, they may have also cut off opportunities for democratic engagement with community groups and in-school stakeholders that research has shown can facilitate buy-in and, thus, sustainability. The top-down approach may also have limited important sources of knowledge to inform responses, as a district- and system-level leaders do not always have the experiences and knowledge of those closest to the "ground," such as campus leaders and community advocates.

Reflection and Organizational Learning in Response to COVID. Many districts explicitly engaged in review and organizational learning processes, particularly during the summers after the 2020 and 2021 school years. Participants in multiple localities recalled attending cabinet-level meetings and discussions with stakeholders to determine 'best practices' or 'lessons learned' from responding to the pandemic the prior year. Multiple participants in Portland and Denver discussed paying close attention to what worked in the last year to roll out district-wide during the following year, reflecting that they anticipated remote schooling would continue for the foreseeable future. In Denver, one district leader recalled planning a meeting for parents, community members, school leaders, and district representatives to reflect on the prior year and learn what could be replicated or changed for the next year. As remote learning became the norm, one rural district leader, who had implemented one remote-learning day each week in the district, noted, "I think our remote learning days [are] staying in our calendar because we saw the benefits…I don't think that's something that is going to go away because of how successful it has been." These leaders described continuous changes and adaptations, sometimes with minor adjustments to respond to what was and was not working in the virtual learning context.

Additionally, some of our localities experienced crises simultaneous to the pandemic, including hurricanes, racist attacks, and, in the case of Washington, D.C., an insurrection and attack on the capitol. They learned from COVID and those crises when responding and coping. Participants across localities described learning to work together and proactively overcome these crises.

Despite evidence that schools and school systems engaged in this learning and reflection, our data were captured too early in the pandemic to assess longer-term adaptations meaningfully. While our data suggest districts learned from their experiences in the short term, it is not clear, based on the data we collected, whether that reflection produced lasting changes to organizational structures, routines, roles, and norms that can come about as a result of the crisis that prepare them for future crises—although districts and schools were certainly expecting some changes to occur. Further, the challenges of the period were so intense that schools were trying to survive, leaving limited time for reflection and learning for the future. Moreover, more time is needed to fully understand whether the coping-related changes we observed become lasting adaptations or represent temporary adjustments.

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Preparing for Crisis. In most localities, the governor's office in early March gave orders to close schools for in-person instruction. This often took the form of an early or extended Spring break as health officials grappled with the

extent and severity of the pandemic. Yet even before these orders were issued, multiple district and school leaders reported reading headlines about COVID and taking action to prepare for a potential operational interruption. These actions, however, were limited primarily to internal emails, calling together cabinet-level leadership and informal meetings between school leaders to discuss potential impacts. Later, we observed more connections between public health officials and district leaders to respond to the severity of the crisis.

Drawing on Lessons from Prior Experience. The experience was critical in shaping responses to COVID and calls for racial justice for both traditional and charter school systems. Before 2020, many school systems, especially in larger urban districts, had already started some form of professional development (e.g., reading groups, unconscious bias training, equity modules) that focused on equity and social justice issues among their district and/or school staff. Other school systems, mainly rural districts, were newer to these conversations. Still, the depth and content of the learning shaped the extent of and nature of organizational change that occurred in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

The Case of New Orleans

Unlike other disasters and states of emergency, where the school district can make decisions about all public schools, individual charter schools had autonomy but voluntarily gave up some power to the school district during the pandemic. In Louisiana, charter schools are their own local educational agencies, or districts, taking responsibility for all school operations and management decisions. During the pandemic, they opted to let the central office become the lead and make key decisions regarding communication with families about meals and technology, canceling sports activities, and scheduling school in-person hours.

Schools in New Orleans also described using technology to ensure continued instruction due to disruptions from the pandemic, hurricanes, and flooding. One private school adopted a hybrid program because of Katrina, and with COVID, they expanded that to include Zoom. The private school's leader described how prior crises led her to adapt the modality of instruction to weather future crises. Although this was an unusual case of a private school with a hybrid curriculum, other schools that created virtual programming for the pandemic described how they could use them in the future.

Participants in New Orleans also described citywide resilience due to prior crises. A district leader told us how parents, families, and school leaders were prepared and expected to receive guidance from the central office during an emergency. Another district leader echoed how New Orleans has "benefited from the past experience" and has a "sense of community and the need to address a really terrible issue together." The leader continues:

> At least just from like a community level on how there's a sense of responsibility to one another. That, to be honest, I don't know is occurring in other cities, even in neighboring parishes, just given like the spirit of New Orleans, which I think is maybe a little corny, but I think it has at least helped us get through some of the darker moments for sure."

The districts and schools that had previously been learning about equity work generally or racial equity work specifically (D.C., Denver, Detroit, a rural Michigan district, and Portland) seemed better positioned to respond in tangible ways that shifted the material realities of racially minoritized students, even if slightly. These participants did not view the events of 2020 to be the start of their work in this area but rather a stimulus for moving the work forward more quickly. For the localities that had not previously engaged in professional learning, this possibly meant a lack of capacity or readiness to undertake system-level racial equity efforts (e.g., curriculum, new hires, legislation) or even to respond to the immediate emotional needs of impacted students and communities.

Some of the districts in this study had experienced major crises before the pandemic, which helped them anticipate the changes brought by the pandemic. These prior forms of the crisis included environmental and financial crises. This points to a more prominent theme of survival and resilience during the pandemic as a skill developed over previous crises, including fires and hurricanes. In New Orleans, for example, systems and policies set up to respond to hurricanes were also employed in response to COVID.

What Factor Shaped Schools' Responses to COVID and Calls for Racial Justice?

Here, we provide insight into what appeared to shape the patterns in the aforementioned responses. Where we see variation in pandemic coping practices across localities in our sample, our respondents indicated that it was due to political dynamics (e.g., state policy requirements, teacher union strength), prior governance structures, changes in competitive pressures, and geographic contexts (e.g., differences driven by urbanicity or rurality). Variations in response to calls for racial justice appeared to be due largely to differences in geographic and political contexts and who was making decisions.

Political Dynamics. School and district leaders in both sectors saw adherence to public health guidance as a strategy to buffer against risk and maintain legitimacy in planning for reopening, even when actual decisions began to diverge over time across sectors. Thus, seeking legitimacy from public schools and public health officials helps explain some similarities in COVID response across sectors, particularly at the start of the pandemic, with more variation across sectors as the pandemic evolved. Similarly, traditional public and charter school leaders were concerned about teacher retention. Teachers' voices played a role even in places without strong unions, which could also explain similar responses across sectors, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. That said, districts with strong unions (such as Detroit) reopened for in-person learning on a slower timeline and gave teachers more options (e.g., the choice of teaching in-person or remote), so district-labor relations did help to explain some of the variations we saw across localities.

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These local political dynamics help to explain why we found that charter and public schools tended to reopen in similar ways and on a similar timeline within the same locality since they were subject to similar political factors. According to our participants, the uncertainty, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, led our study's charter schools and private schools to emulate the decisions of TPS. In this moment of extreme uncertainty and lack of knowledge about the virus, schools of choice in our study generally defaulted to TPSs, because they often had deeper ties to public health agencies historically and to prevent teachers from leaving for TPS schools.

Key Decision-Makers in School COVID Response

State leaders and policymakers	District and school leaders	Public health officials
State leaders and policymakers were vital in the initial response to the COVID pandemic, particularly the initial school closures. Across the country, governors moved swiftly to close schools in the Spring of 2020 as part of their efforts to minimize the community spread of the virus. The early school closure decisions during the pandemic were similar across different localities and sectors, primarily because of the initial guidance. In all five states in our study, governors and their state agencies drew on information from public health officials to issue health guidance, but the degree to which they required schools and districts to use this health guidance varied, which shaped school and district responses. State leaders also adopted school finance policies ("hold harmless" policies) to maintain schools' funding despite enrollment changes due to the pandemic.	Because states left many decisions to the local level, particularly around reopening in the Fall of 2020, district and school leaders were the primary decision-makers during the pandemic. Their decisions (e.g., modality, how to provide services to families, etc.) were often political, as many groups of actors with differing values and preferences (e.g., teachers' unions, health officials, parents) had something at stake and were seeking to protect their interests, using whatever resources they had to influence these key decisions. Local leadership also strongly influenced racial equity work. Some leaders proactively addressed racial injustice by incorporating programs addressing anti-bias trainings and racial inequity before 2020. In these cases, leaders were perhaps more familiar with the importance of equity work due to their district context, personal experiences, and relevant training.	Across localities, we saw district leaders and teachers' unions invoke guidance from local and national public health officials to advance their interests, a key driver of similarities. Furthermore, charter and private school leaders within localities reported deferring to traditional public schools because they were already working with public health authorities, which could explain similarities across sectors.

Governance Structures. As noted earlier, the crisis conditions during the early months of the pandemic motivated new areas of collaboration and centralization between and within school sectors, particularly around basic needs, health protocols, and online learning guidance. This coordination contributed to the level of commonality in school and district responses. This collaboration meant that responses, such as food distribution, looked similar across sectors. The extent of collaboration and centralization was moderated by the existing choice governance structure, within and across sectors.

Changes in Competitive Pressures. Across the country, state legislatures implemented education policies that would help schools and districts address the difficulties of the pandemic, particularly declining enrollment. Lawmakers in a majority of U.S. states passed "hold-harmless" bills that connected current-year funding to past attendance or enrollment, which (along with federal funds) helped prevent districts from facing a budget crunch in the middle of a crisis. Both sectors' urban district and school leaders felt that the hold-harmless policies relieved some competitive pressure. Key examples include Detroit, where the public schools' enrollment dropped by around 3,000 students, and Washington, D.C., where charter schools felt less pressure to compete for enrollment.

The "hold harmless" policies alleviated schools' financial pressures to attract and retain students, allowing them to cooperate and match one another's pandemic responses without the need for competition. This might explain why the responses of different sectors were so similar.

Despite this drop in immediate enrollment pressure and competition, some charter schools still felt an inherent competition or comparison with TPS that drove some COVID responses. For example, two charter school leaders implied that aligning their responses with those of TPSs may have assisted with managing competition: one felt it was critical at this uncertain time to offer comparable options as TPSs for fear of losing families. For example, a charter school administrator in Portland expressed concern "that if the charter schools can't offer the same options, they won't look like a comparable option anymore." Another noted it was not worth the risk of opening in person

sooner than TPSs planned to do in case something went wrong. This behavior, which appeared to be cooperative on the surface, with charters aligning with TPS, was actually driven by competition.

Although we generally found diminished competitive pressures during the early period of the pandemic, we did observe some competitive behavior and differentiation in a few cases. As noted earlier, some charter schools opened sooner than their traditional public school counterparts. Also, in rural Michigan, one district leader reported that school districts were using masking policy as a form of marketing:

> Early on, we had school districts and charter schools using masks or no masks as marketing. Like I found that fascinating in the sense of when else can I remember a time when public health – either following public health guidance or not following public health guidance – was used as a marketing piece. But we did have local cases where marketing of "we don't require masks of students" was actually a thing.

In sum, diminished competitive pressures may have played a role in advancing similar pandemic responses across sectors - though in some localities, the drive to stand out remained strong despite the broader shifts in the school choice market.

Geographic Context. Another key condition reported to shape COVID responses and help explain the patterns we observed is geographic context. As noted earlier, the rural districts in our study typically began reopening and offering in-person instruction sooner, described less contention around reopening, and had more centralized communications with families during the pandemic than the urban districts in our study.

"Another key condition reported to shape COVID responses and help explain the patterns we observed is geographic context."

The vast structural inequalities in many of our urban localities might also have shaped what schools could do to respond to COVID. Initially, especially given the high poverty levels, schools in urban contexts prioritized providing basic needs, such as meals. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that we saw little variation across charter and traditional public schools within these localities with respect to how they delivered these services, and we saw more efforts to coordinate and centralize these services.

The enrollment levels of rural school systems also played a role in responses, as the small size facilitated communication with families–central office staff often had personal relationships with families and fewer numbers to contact. Their smaller size and relative homogeneity (compared with our urban localities) might have also facilitated more community cohesion and alignment in what families felt the district should offer.

The geography of rural districts and structural limitations facing families in remote areas also constrained their ability to provide virtual instruction, which might also explain the decision to prioritize in-person instruction early on. Limited Wi-Fi access and quality in rural areas, and the speed and bandwidth required for engaging online or viewing educational videos, created significant challenges for rural localities.

Therefore, although rural districts sought to improve technology access for families who opted for virtual instruction, these districts prioritized returning to in-person instruction as quickly as possible in light of these structural constraints. Overall, while both urban and rural districts faced challenges ensuring access to technology and Wi-Fi, more significant structural challenges in rural areas might help explain why the rural districts in our study were more willing and ready to return to in-person instruction once it was allowed under state policies.

Regarding responses to calls for racial justice, the starkest differences we observed were between urban and rural contexts, which overlapped with liberal and conservative political differences in our localities. School systems in politically liberal urban areas—such as Denver, Portland, Detroit, and Washington DC—tended to have prior training with equity-related content and were more prone to structural responses, while school systems in politically conservative areas—namely, one rural Michigan district and the rural Oregon district—needed to build the infrastructure for professional development and responded more symbolically. That said, the level of recognition of deep-rooted systems of inequities seemed to reflect the local demographic and political context. Their fluency with these issues was reflected in their pre-2020 actions, and the actions a district was willing or "ready" to take in response to calls for change in 2020. Notably, two cases deviated from these explanatory conditions: New Orleans was an outlier among urban school systems in our sample in that they reported beginning discussions about racial equity at the district level just before the onset of the pandemic but not enacting any substantive policies or changes (possibly due to their limited control over school management). One rural Michigan district reported substantive changes as the district devoted extra resources and support for Native American students during the pandemic and involved the Native American community in the decision-making processes.

"Regarding responses to calls for racial justice, the starkest differences we observed were between urban and rural contexts, which overlapped with liberal and conservative political differences in our localities."

How Did We Carry Out This Study?

The research team conducted interviews via Zoom with education and community leaders between December 2020 and July 2021. (See full report for more detailed methodology.) Researchers completed 68 interviews across eight localities. Interview participants included central office administrators, system leaders/superintendents, school leaders, teachers' union leaders, and community/advocacy leaders. We also conducted parent interviews in some of our localities. We drew on a subsample of 46 parents who filled out a survey in our urban case study districts (but not in rural districts), prioritizing lower-income families and seeking variation in racial/ethnic background, school sector, and students' grade levels.

The localities we study in this report include schools and school systems in four states (Colorado, Louisiana, Michigan, and Oregon), which were purposely sampled to represent variation in choice policies and settings, including geography, population, types of choice policies, and the maturity of these policies. As previously noted, all four states had charter school policies, and Louisiana operated voucher programs that funded students to attend private schools. Within each state, we selected a large urban district (Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, and Portland). We also included the District of Columbia (DC), a hybrid state district. All of these districts provide important variations in governance structure and choice context. While Portland and the three rural districts represent more typical districts with few charter schools, Denver, Detroit, and DC have sizable charter populations, and New Orleans includes only charter schools. When the pandemic hit in March 2020 and we pivoted the focus of our research, we decided to add rural districts to our sample to understand better that important context and COVID responses unfolded in the rural context. We focused on two geographically adjacent rural districts in Michigan and one in Oregon.

Although we sought to capture perspectives from various school sectors to explore how and why they developed particular strategies in response to COVID, our results do not represent entire sectors in each locality. Our results draw

from limited data from a small number of schools. We aim to help contextualize and explain school responses during the pandemic by exploring the role of various conditions. Our interviews were conducted in the first 16 months of the pandemic, so our results speak mainly to the more immediate response.

We acknowledge that even large-scale data collection processes can only capture limited community perspectives. As such, our parent interview sample (curated from our survey respondents) may not fully represent the experiences and/or concerns of guardians most negatively impacted by racial injustice following the murder of Mr. Floyd. And while our case study interviews included community advocates in many districts, we were limited in capturing a wide range of community voices.

Lastly, we acknowledge that this study does not attempt to draw causal conclusions regarding the patterns we share and the conditions shaping them; nor do we conclude the general state of public, private, and charter school sectors writ large. As is common in case study research, the design of this study only allows us to understand the unique experiences of a small sample of traditional public and charter school leaders and parents within our five case.

Conclusion

As the world contends with traumas and injustices, we can learn how educational institutions addressed the COVID pandemic and amplified calls for racial equity following George Floyd's death. The results of this report can help school administrators of all levels consider the consequences of their responses, the effects of their environment on those responses, and how to plan for the future in this essential endeavor.

"The results of this report can help school administrators of all levels consider the consequences of their responses, the effects of their environment on those responses, and how to plan for the future in this essential endeavor."

Our research points to the fact that while most schools and school systems in our study weren't prepared for a pandemic of this size, they implemented crisis response plans that valued coordination and centralization to manage the situation, even if that meant sacrificing certain freedoms. For example, some states, like Louisiana, had put policies in place prior to emergencies such as hurricanes, while others had to create new forms of collaboration during the crisis.

Our research, conducted in the initial months of the pandemic, reveals essential observations about health emergencies and how school systems answered in the first year. Our findings suggest that a combined and uniform response across all sectors is helpful for all schools at the start of a crisis, particularly in centralizing basic needs (food, technology, and communication). With the summer of 2020 to plan, schools could make tailored plans while complying with overall state or district guidelines. For instance, they had additional time to decide how to manage instruction during the fall of 2020.

Regarding heightened attention toward racial injustice, professional development was critical in shaping schools' and school systems' responses. Decision-making often remained centralized at the district levels with limited input from or collaboration with parents and communities. We found that these localities' geographic and political contexts contributed more to differences between responses than school or system type (traditional public, charter, or private school). Specifically, we note that the local context heavily determines the extent to which schools take

action and learn from that action. Local context also appears to attract and produce education leaders who meet the needs and desires of their organizations and surrounding communities. It is also important to note any action taken by itself does not bring about equitable conditions. Statements, memorials, and official policy stances attempt to wrestle with their legacies of racism and/or right the wrongs against racially minoritized students. Still, these actions are often abstract, making them largely ineffective at improving the material and structural realities of racially minoritized students.

It is important to note that this study's interviews predated the national debate around Critical Race Theory (CRT), which has complicated the landscape around racially equitable policy and practice. However, in responding to future calls for racial justice, education leaders may consider the material benefit of their policy responses for racially minoritized students. They may also want to consider investing in meaningful professional development and providing outside student support. If they value pursuing racial justice, they may choose to reflect on how parents' perceptions of school responses can vary based on parents' unique social positionalities; and remain vigilant in addressing issues of interpersonal racism and structural racism.

In responding to future health events or natural disasters, our work suggests developing policies to ensure that school systems serving a common geographic area coordinate for crisis response. This is important across the board, particularly for districts serving impoverished students, students of color, and other marginalized backgrounds. Indeed, district leaders we spoke with viewed centralization of information about health protocols and basic needs services (e.g., food, technology) as critical to their approaches to equity—to ensure that critical information and resources were available at a central location, regardless of which school or sector the families attended.

“We argue that the dampening of competitive pressures due to state ‘hold harmless’ policies that kept budgets consistent and predictable helped to create the conditions for collaboration across school districts and sectors.”

We also observe that state and federal policy plays an important role in moments of crisis. We argue that the dampening of competitive pressures due to state “hold harmless” policies that kept budgets consistent and predictable helped to create the conditions for collaboration across school districts and sectors. We can imagine that absent these policies, there could have been a different, more competitive rather than collaborative response to the pandemic that would have created more chaos and confusion for students and families seeking access to basic needs.

Finally, additional research is needed to explore how schools have continued to respond to the health crisis and, in particular, how they might be learning from their early responses and adapting or shifting organizational structures, systems, or strategies in response to the pandemic in ways that are long-lasting and equity-oriented. While COVID was a major shock to educational organizations across the globe, it was also clear that it was not an isolated event and that more crises were likely to come. In fact, during this research, we witnessed national and local crises on top of the pandemic, such as the national reckoning with racial injustice, hurricanes, wildfires, and an insurrection at the U.S. capitol. As such, it is essential to understand how schools and systems respond so we can design and implement changes in policy and practice that will better prepare for the future.

How Does This Relate To Other REACH Research?

REACH has a significant body of work investigating the multifaceted impacts that COVID-19 has had on education. For more information, visit

- Schools and School Choice During a Year of Disruption: Views of Parents in Five States
- Why Did So Many Public Schools Stay Remote During the COVID Crisis?
- The Effects of School Reopenings on COVID-19 Hospitalizations
- How America's Schools Responded to the COVID Crisis

Additional research on this subject will be released in the near future including *Choice in a Time of COVID: Immediate Enrollment Decisions in New York City and Detroit*, which will be released later this month.

About the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH)

Founded in 2018, REACH provides objective, rigorous, and applicable research that informs and improves school choice policy design and implementation, to increase opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged students. REACH is housed at Tulane University with an Executive Committee that includes researchers from Tulane, Michigan State University, Syracuse University, and the University of Southern California.

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