NEPC Review: Remote Learning Is Here to Stay: Results from the First american School District Panel Survey (RAND Corporation, December 2020)

Reviewed by:

David R. Garcia
Arizona State University

February 2021

National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
(802) 383-0058
nepc.colorado.edu

Acknowledgements

NEPC Staff

Faith Boninger
Publications Manager

Patricia Hinchey
Academic Editor

Elaine Duggan
Production Design

Alex Molnar
Publications Director

Kevin Welner
NEPC Director

Suggested Citation: Garcia, D.R. (2021). *NEPC Review: "Remote Learning Is Here to Stay: Results from the First American School District Panel Survey."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/remote-learning

Funding: This review was made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

This publication is provided free of cost to NEPC's readers, who may make non-commercial use of it as long as NEPC and its author(s) are credited as the source. For inquiries about commercial use, please contact NEPC at nepc@colorado.edu.

NEPC Review: Remote Learning Is Here to Stay: Results from the First American School District Panel Survey (RAND Corporation, December 2020)

Reviewed by:

David R. Garcia
Arizona State University

February 2021

Summary

The RAND Corporation recently released a report based on a national survey of school district superintendents and charter management organization (CMO) directors (or their designees) about their experiences navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey asks non-biased questions about how school districts and charter schools have responded to the pandemic and about their greatest educational needs. But some issues arise with the report's reporting of results and with one of its two recommendations. The report is curiously titled, *Remote Learning is Here to Stay*, but that headline is surprisingly unsupported by the survey responses. In fact, the respondents expressed much higher concerns about three other areas: (1) "addressing students' Socio-Emotional Learning and mental health needs" (the area with the greatest need for additional resources), (2) "addressing disparities in student opportunities to learn that result from differences in supplemental supports provided by families" (the most anticipated challenge), and (3) inadequate funding (the top staffing challenge). Relative to these concerns, remote learning is a minor consideration. The report's first recommendation does follow from the respondents' need for more funding to address inequities and socio-emotional learning. But the other recommendation, for more funding to support remote learning, does not appear to align with needs expressed by district leaders. Finally, the report combines two different types of local education agencies (school districts and CMOs). Thus, while the report suggests that its most important finding is that "about two in ten districts have already adopted, plan to adopt, or are considering adopting virtual schools as part of their district portfolio after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic," it is unclear how much of this result is driven by CMOs rather than school districts. For these reasons, readers are encouraged to go beyond the title and read deeper to get a complete picture of the challenges, needs, and future of education from district leaders' perspectives.

NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

NEPC Review: Remote Learning Is Here to Stay: Results from the First American School District Panel Survey (RAND Corporation, December 2020)

Reviewed by:
David R. Garcia
Arizona State University

February 2021

I. Introduction

COVID-19 created an unprecedent disruption to education in both scope and suddenness. As a result, policymakers have a keen interest in how school districts and charter schools have responded, what their greatest educational needs are, and what the changes portend for education in the future. As a contribution to filling this void, the RAND Corporation released *Remote Learning Is Here to Stay: Results from the First American School District Panel Survey* by Heather L. Schwartz, David Grant, Melissa Diliberti, Gerald P. Hunter, and Claude Messan Setodji.[1]

The report is based on a survey of school district superintendents and charter management organization (CMO) directors (or their designees) about their experiences navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample consisted of 319 respondents, although the individual numbers of school district and CMO respondents are not reported. Instead, the results are combined into a single group, with both types of local education agencies labeled collectively as "districts" and respondents as "district leaders." The report does break out the survey results into two groups: districts with a student population that is at least 50 percent Black or Hispanic/Latino (*focus* districts), and districts below the 50 percent threshold (*nonfocus* districts). Finally, the results are weighted to account for nonresponse and coverage errors because the survey sample included a considerably higher percentage of large, urban districts than the national population.

The report aspires to be useful to a broad audience of education stakeholders, ranging from state departments of education to policymakers, by providing a "national picture of school districts' needs and approaches to school reopening."[2]

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The findings pertain to respondents' perceptions of the 2020-2021 school year. The top two survey responses with highest percentages are reported, unless indicated otherwise.

1. Ratings for the greatest need for additional resources were highest for addressing students' social and emotional learning and mental health needs (61%) and providing high-quality instructional resources to meet the needs of all students (58%) (see Table 2).[3]

2. Ratings for anticipated moderate or significant challenges were highest for addressing disparities in students' opportunities to learn resulting from variances in families' supplemental supports (86%), followed by dealing with state accountability requirements (73%) (see Table 3).[4]

3. Among staffing challenges that respondents considered slight, moderate or major factors hindering high-quality instruction, the following were most significant: inadequate funding to cover staffing needs (69%), followed by the need for mental health supports for teachers (58%) (see Table 4).[5]

4. District leaders indicated the need for professional development in every area surveyed. Professional development was to address students' social and emotional well-being was the highest rated, with 83% of respondents calling it a moderate or great need (see Table 5).[6]

5. District COVID-19 plans were most influenced by state and local health departments, with 95% of respondents rating them as moderately or greatly influential, followed by state education agencies (89%) and other principals in the district (89%). Lowest rankings for moderate or great influence were assigned to political leaders (36%) and the U.S. Department of Education (18%) (see Table 6).[7]

6. New approaches to schooling included making learning communities virtual, with 48% of respondents planning adoption and another 16% considering it but lacking the resources or flexibility to do so; respondents also were considering flexible staffing models, with 41% planning adoption and another 18% considering it but constrained by lack of resources or flexibility (Table 7).[8]

7. The innovative practices that districts anticipate continuing after the COVID-19 pandemic include continuing to provide virtual schools or fully online options, with 15% of respondents adopting or planning to adopt this practice and 6% considering adoption; respondents were also considering blending or hybrid models, with 9% adopting or planning to adopt this practice and 1% considering it (Table 8).[9]

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The rationale for the findings and conclusions is based on 1) the extent to which the survey results are generalizable the population, 2) the extent to which the survey items measure what they intended to measure, 3) the assumption that the survey responses with the highest percentages are the most important to districts, and 4) the reported differences are large enough to be noteworthy (e.g., the differences between the responses of *focus* and *nonfocus* districts and the differences between individual survey responses).

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report's use of research literature was limited but appropriate given the brevity of the report. Of the 14 references, six were citations to other RAND Corporation reports. Three of the citations supported the point that students enrolled in online charter schools had poorer education outcomes compared to students in traditional schools. Lastly, the report also includes two citations to support the weighting methods.

The report does not include citations to distinguish itself from reports on school district responses to COVID-19.[10] While the research in this area is still emerging, there is some quality work on both school district reactions and policy recommendations for getting back to school that, if cited, would help readers get a more thorough perspective of the challenges and potential opportunities facing districts.[11]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report obfuscates the extent to which the survey sample is representative of the national population of school districts and charter schools. The districts and Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) that completed the survey were recruited through a two-step process. First, a total of 1,685 districts and CMOs were asked to participate in the American School District Panel (ASDP). Of those, 379 agreed (22%). Second, upon agreeing to participate in the ASDP, the districts were sent the COVID-19 survey, which 319 districts returned. Only this second step yielded reported response rate of 84% (the number of districts responding divided by the number of districts receiving the survey).

Per the note in Table 1, the population sample "consists of U.S. public school districts (approximately 13,000 districts) in the original sampling frame for ASDP recruitment."[12] Thus, the 319 districts that completed the survey actually represent only 19% of the districts recruited to represent the population of U.S. school districts and charter schools (the number of districts that completed the survey divided by the number of districts recruited to participate in the ASDP).

Compared to the population, the survey sample consists of a higher percentage of large, urban districts. The report adjusts the survey results via weighting, a statistical procedure that

lowers the influence of districts over-represented in the sample and increases the influence of districts under-represented in the sample. Weighting is a common practice to adjust the sample results to match the population, after the final survey sample has been established. The report does not report the margin of error associated with the sample. The survey items do not read as biased or misleading.

To summarize the results, the report includes descriptive statistics, but it does not include inferential statistics to test how well the results are generalizable to the population or to assess the extent to which the reported differences (for example, between *focus* and *nonfocus* districts or between individual items) are large enough to guide policy. Such statistics are helpful for readers to determine the extent to which the noted differences in survey results (for example, more district leaders believe *x* than *y*) may be due to chance or instead may denote actual differences among the general population.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report suggests—through its title and preeminent placement in the report—that its most important finding is that "about two in ten districts have already adopted, plan to adopt, or are considering adopting virtual schools as part of their district portfolio after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic." If the responses with the highest percentages are the most important to district leaders, then it raises the question of why the results on remote learning are highlighted in the title and are reported as the lead Key Finding. District leaders expressed much higher concerns about "addressing students' Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) and mental health needs" (the area with the greatest need for additional resources), "addressing disparities in student opportunities to learn that result from differences in supplemental supports provided by families" (the most anticipated challenge), and inadequate funding (the top staffing challenge).

The report concludes with two policy recommendations. The first recommendation is that districts be provided more federal and state funding to redress differences in students' opportunities to learn during COVID-19 and to prevent cuts below pre-COVID-19 funding levels. This recommendation is well-supported based on the survey results. The support for the second recommendation, that "with federal funding, states and education content developers should develop easily accessed coherent instructional systems for online instruction" is more tenuous.[13] The second recommendation does not match the priorities of district leaders.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

There is considerable uncertainty among districts about how to provide quality, equitable education during COVID-19, and policymakers have an urgent need for information about

what the pandemic-induced challenges mean for the future. The report is another source for stakeholders to learn about the present conditions facing education leaders who must make prospective programmatic and policy decisions in an unpredictable and rapidly changing environment.

This report, however, does not distinguish itself from similar national surveys on education during COVID-19 in any noteworthy manner. Readers are encouraged to go beyond the title and dig deeper to get a complete picture of the challenges, needs, and future of education from district leaders' perspectives. Readers should also be aware that the report is providing the basis for additional publications, such as *Public Education Will Never be the Same* by the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE). To the extent that the concerns raised in this review resonate with readers, caution is advised about secondary uses.

Notes and References

1 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

2 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 1). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

3 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote Learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel Survey* (p. 5). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

4 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 6). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

5 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 8). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

6 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 10). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

7 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 12). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

8 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 14). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

9 These responses were open-ended and 73% of respondents answered the question about which innovative practices they anticipated continuing in future years, even after the pandemic has passed.

Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 16). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

10 See for instance, *National survey of public education's response to COVID-19* by the American Institutes for Research available online at https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-education-s-response-covid-19

Or the surveys conducted by *Education Week,* available online at https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/national-survey-tracks-impact-of-coronavirus-on-schools-10-key-findings/2020/04

11 For example, see the COVID-19 oriented reports, blogs, and tools from the Learning Policy Institute available online at https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/

12 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 4). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

13 Schwartz, H.L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., & Setodji, C.M. (2020). *Remote learning is here to stay: Results from the first American School District Panel survey* (p. 18). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

14 Lake, R. (2021). *Public education will never be the same: How COVID -19 forced school district leaders to innovate on fly*. Bothell, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved February 8, 2021, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/final_asdp_qualitative_brief.pdf