

# COVID-19 U.S. School District Action Plans: How were school districts prepared in the spring of 2020?

Jake P. Joseph, Serena A. Shedore, & Lizzy Cashiola, Ph.D.

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In spring 2020, as U.S. schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and moved to distance learning, school districts were left scrambling to prepare. Few resources were available to support U.S. public school districts in handling distance learning during a pandemic, or any other event that could cause a sudden transition to long-term remote learning. HERC researchers set out to examine what distance learning plans were available in the spring of 2020. HERC collected 45 school district action plans addressing continuity of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic from school districts in 15 states that were publicly available between March and May 2020. These plans were summarized and coded to describe common themes about what school districts had or had not prepared for when schools began to close in 2020. The four themes from these school action plans that form the foundation of this report are 1) addressing equity, 2) technology support, 3) logistics for remote learning, and 4) addressing non-academic needs.

## Key Findings

### Most school district plans prepared for equity but did not anticipate certain challenges.

- These plans included equity of access to technology and a focus on special populations (e.g., special education students and English learners). However, most school districts did not plan for the possibility of students becoming unreachable during remote learning.

### School district plans anticipated the need for technology support.

- Two-thirds of districts planned for technology support to teachers and students, anticipating this would be a significant need during remote learning.

### School district plans showed little consistency for the logistics of changing to remote learning.

- School district plans for remote learning varied significantly in terms of teacher preparation, instructional delivery, and grading protocols.

### Non-academic needs, such as food and mental health support, were not fully addressed.

- School districts planned for the pandemic's effect on students' mental health but not on teachers', and less than half planned for food distribution to families in need.



## Historical Context

While COVID-19 was unprecedented, there is a history of viral pandemics forcing school closures. Most have occurred in countries other than the U.S., such as during the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the H1N1 outbreak in 2009. However, in 2006, some U.S. schools were forced to close due to the seasonal flu. In response to these U.S. school closures, the U.S. Department of Education issued [guidelines](#) for school districts to have a continuity of learning plan in place in the case of another flu pandemic. The CDC also issued similar guidance to K-12 schools in the event of a flu pandemic in [2009](#), [2017](#), and [2020](#). However, the specifics of these continuity of learning plans were left up to school districts. In addition, any guidance provided prior to 2020 did not appear to anticipate the need to prepare for an extended school closure like the one experienced with COVID-19. Given this context, U.S. school districts were not fully prepared for this pandemic, particularly in the case of distance learning. To better understand the specifics of how school districts responded to the pandemic, HERC examined publicly available school district action plans at the beginning of the pandemic.

# Key Findings

The school district plan evaluation rubric revealed 4 distinct themes among plans: 1) equity, 2) technology & communication, 3) logistics, and 4) non-academic needs. From these four distinct themes, HERC was able to determine several key findings which could inform district actions towards planning for future pandemic scenarios. For more information on the methods for this study, please see the appendix.

1

## Most school district plans addressed equity to some extent.

**Most school district plans considered issues of equity related to technology access for all students, as well as services for special populations, such as special education students and English learners. However, most school district plans did not address the possibility of students becoming unreachable during remote learning.**

In the spring of 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts across the United States shifted to remote learning as the only option for instruction. With an increased use of technology, school districts commonly explored methods to provide students with access to computers or tablets. In fact, almost 70% of school district plans addressed the need to provide students with devices.

In addition to broader equity in technology access, the needs of special population groups were often specifically mentioned in school action plans, with 78% of plans mentioning special education students and 58% of plans mentioning English learners. The majority of plans mentioned specific actions to take and resources to use to meet these individual student needs within the remote learning environment.

While plans regularly included provisions regarding equitable access to technology and support for special populations, they typically did not include contingency plans for students who became completely unreachable (either by choice or circumstances). Only 27% of school district plans included contingencies for dealing with students who were completely unreachable.

2

## School district plans anticipated the need for technology support.

**Two-thirds of districts planned for technology support to teachers and students, anticipating this would be a significant need during remote learning.**

Remote learning made technological support provided by the district a necessity. To assure a quick and smooth transition to remote learning and to quickly address technology-related issues, 67% of district plans employed technological support services for their teachers and students. Districts utilized their existing technology support staff to provide immediate support to families who did not have access to reliable internet either by providing internet hot spots or directing families to resources for free or low-cost internet access at home. In addition, many districts created a help or service desk or hotline where students could troubleshoot issues with devices or online programs. Some districts also provided on-site support for damaged or non-functioning devices.

# Key Findings

3

## School district plans showed little consistency around logistics.

### School district plans for remote learning varied significantly in terms of teacher preparation, instructional delivery, and grading protocols.

Only about half of district plans mentioned any teacher training (e.g., best practices for distance learning, how to record online lessons, or using online tools). When mentioned, teacher training was most commonly provided by the district instead of an outside source.

For instructional delivery (Figure 1), most district plans provided a combination of printed packets, synchronous classes (i.e., students participating in online instruction with a teacher in real-time), pre-recorded classes, or self-directed curriculum. A common theme was fewer contact hours than normal because of concern for technology burnout and students' inability to stay engaged virtually for long periods of time. Almost none of the plans included a plan for the 2020-2021 school year. There was no mention of whether the next school year would be in-person, hybrid, or virtual, reflecting the uncertainty at the time for how the pandemic would continue to affect schooling.

Figure 1. Instructional delivery varied across plans.

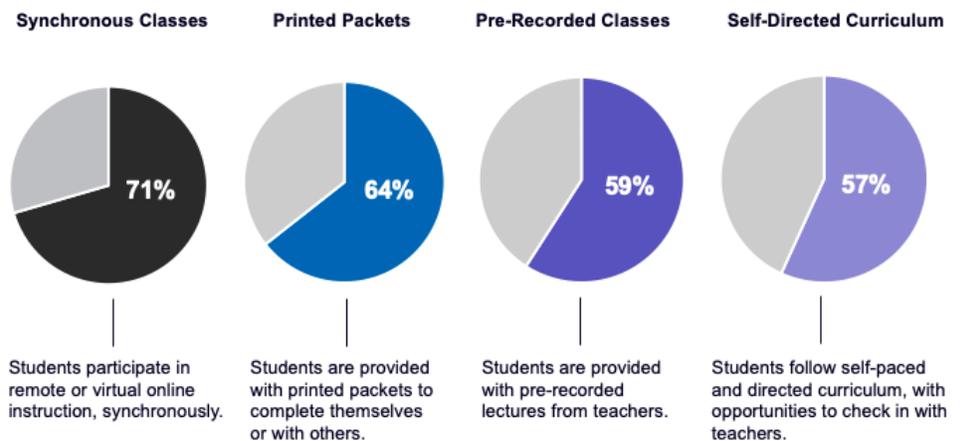
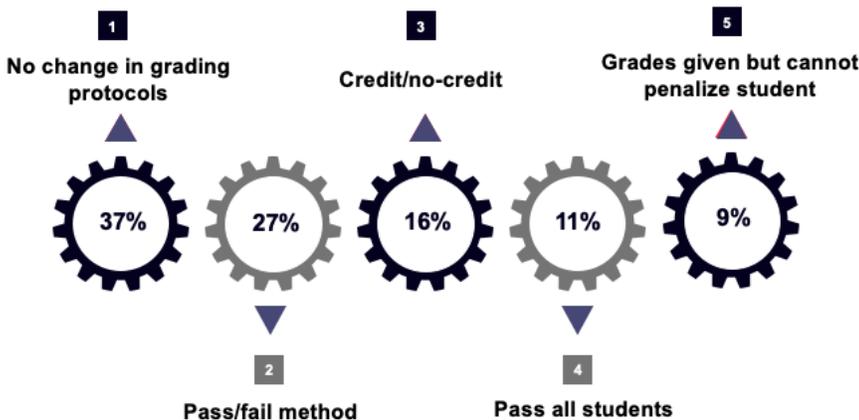


Figure 2. Variability in grading protocols across plans



In addition, there was also no consensus on grading protocols (Figure 2). Protocols included (1) no changes in grading, (2) pass/fail (failure goes on student's record), (3) credit/no-credit (student either given credit or failure does not go on student's record), (4) pass all students, and (5) provide grades they cannot penalize a student (e.g., lower their GPA or not allow them to progress to the next grade). Within districts, grading protocols were often dependent on the grade level.

# Key Findings

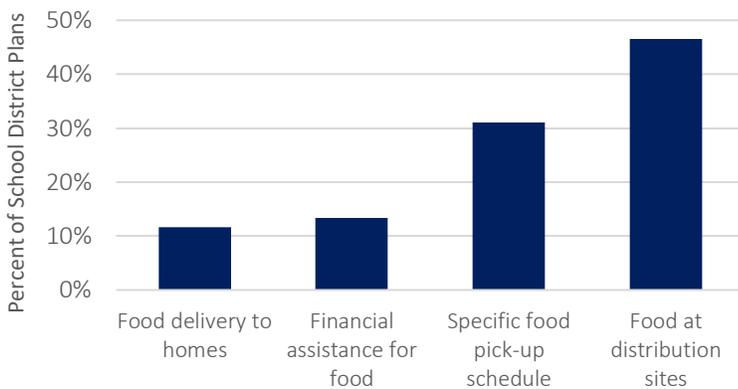
4

**Non-academic needs for students and teachers were not fully addressed.**

**School district plans addressed the pandemic’s impact on students’ mental health but not on teachers’, and less than half planned for food distribution to families in need.**

A majority of plans (almost 70%) mentioned mental health support for students, such as access to school counselors and providing resources to families for managing stress. However, only 20% of plans mentioned providing counseling or other mental health resources to teachers.

**Figure 3. Solutions for providing families with school meals**



*Note.* School district plans could provide multiple solutions for providing school meals. Therefore, plans could be included in more than one category.

Half of school district plans addressed how to provide meals to students and families who usually depend on school meal programs, offering a diverse set of solutions (see Figure 3). The most common solution was to have food distribution sites where families could pick up meals. About a third of plans described a specific food pick-up schedule (such as Mondays and Thursdays). Few plans mentioned delivering food to students’ homes or providing families with financial assistance for food.

## Conclusion

More than a year has passed since the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the way U.S. schools educate their students. Many lessons have been learned, leaving schools districts better prepared for future events that could require a short- or long-term transition to remote learning when in-person learning is not feasible. However, it is important to look back and understand the context of preparedness among U.S. schools at the beginning of this unprecedented pandemic. First, only 45 school action plans for distance learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic were found, meaning most school districts did not have a published plan. In other words, it is likely that most school districts did not have a plan in place to inform the quick and unexpected transition to remote learning.

From these available plans, it was evident that school districts prepared in advance for some situations (e.g., technology access and focusing on special populations), but it was also clear there were other things school districts did not or could not have prepared for given the uncertain length of time doing distance learning (e.g., being unable to reach some students at all, addressing non-academic needs of teachers). The inconsistency within the plans for logistics of distance learning is likely attributed to the lack of precedent for this type of situation. Now that there is a year’s worth of lessons learned, school districts can document this new information and create plans to be immediately utilized before, during, and after a pandemic or other similar event that leads to a quick shift to long-term remote learning.

## Data and Methods

### Data

Data collection took place beginning in April 2020 and concluded at the end of May 2020. HERC collected a total of 45 school action plans from districts in 15 states that were publicly available during the window of data collection. To find school action plans, HERC used an online search engine to search for key words (e.g., “continuity of learning plan”, “remote learning recommendations”, “distance learning”, “online instruction”, and “pandemic”). After several school action plans were identified, additional key words (e.g., “continuity of instruction”, “instruction in alternative settings”, “instructional continuity plan”) were added to expand the online search more broadly.

In order to be included in the sample, plans had to be from a public school district in the United States. Plans were excluded if they belonged to non-public schools (e.g., private schools) or non-US schools (e.g., schools in England, Canada, or Mexico). Plans included in the study were published by school districts between early March 2020 and the end of May 2020. In this way, each of the plans included in this analysis were specifically developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on U.S. schools.

### Methods

Each of the 45 school action plans were read and summarized by a team of researchers at HERC. The team of researchers met regularly to discuss their summaries and identified overlapping information and consistent content. From these summaries, six broad topic areas were identified as being addressed by these plans: (1) implementation of distance learning immediately following the cessation of in-person instruction, (2) plans for distance teaching and learning (including instructional delivery, grading protocols, and technology support), (3) support and training for teachers, (4) communication with and support of students and families, (5) recovery once schools reopened, and (6) support for special populations (i.e., special education and English learner students).

Using these 6 topic areas as a guide, a rubric was created for coding items and determining if a plan addressed a particular topic (e.g., metrics for determining what terms and content were required for a plan to qualify as having given consideration to “support for special population”). HERC researchers cross-validated the rubric using two of the school action plans to ensure consistency in how a plan would be coded, and after making a few minor adjustments, set out to code each plan based on what it did and did not include.

HERC researchers coded each of the 45 school action plans, identifying whether one of the six broad topic areas was addressed, what specific components of the broad topic areas were addressed, and how these components were addressed. For example, as mentioned in the body of the research brief, “implementation of distance learning” was discussed in nearly every school action plan, but the details of how distance learning was implemented varied from district to district, some opting for synchronous instruction and others preferring pre-recorded classes.

Results from the coding rubric were analyzed for patterns and themes. Based on this analysis, the six broad topic areas were reduced to four themes that occurred across the 6 topic areas: 1) equity, 2) technology & communication, 3) logistics, and 4) non-academic needs. These are the themes discussed in this report.

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**Note on the authors.** Jake Joseph and Serena Shedore are undergraduate research assistants at HERC. Lizzy Cashiola is a research scientist at HERC.

**About HERC.** Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between Rice University and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



**Houston Education Research Consortium**  
**A program of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research**  
Rice University | 713-348-2532  
herc@rice.edu | Find us online: [herc.rice.edu](http://herc.rice.edu)