



RESEARCH
for ACTION

Responses to COVID-19 School Closures

A Scan of Continuity of Education Plans
for Allegheny County Public Schools

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Introduction

On March 13, 2020, Governor Tom Wolf announced that all K-12 Pennsylvania schools would close for two weeks due to the coronavirus pandemic. The closure period was then extended for the remainder of the school year. In the face of these school closures, Governor Wolf signed Act 13 of 2020, which:

- Allowed governing bodies of “school entities” (school districts, area career and technical centers, intermediate units, charter schools, cyber charter schools, and regional charter schools) to request that the Secretary of Education waive certain provisions, regulations, and standards for the current school year;
- Waived the minimum 180-school day requirement; and
- Required school entities to “make good faith efforts to implement **continuity of education plans** for the duration of the 2019-20 school year.”¹

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PATTAN), and Pennsylvania intermediate units developed guidance to assist school entities in creating and delivering their continuity of education plans (CEPs). According to the guidance, delivery of instruction could take a variety of forms, including online/digital learning opportunities and non-digital learning opportunities (for example, materials sent home), depending on the availability of resources, feasibility, access and equity considerations, and social distancing guidance in a particular school community. Few state resources were available to assist with the transition to remote learning.²

While a CEP was only a school entity’s *plan* and may not align perfectly with what occurred in actual *practice*, CEPs detail critical information on how school entities endeavored to provide learning opportunities during mandated building closure. For example, most CEPs provided information on a school entity’s:

- start date for remote learning,
- platforms used to deliver instruction and the structure of lessons,
- attendance measures and grading policies,
- modes of communication between teachers, students, and families,
- availability of additional student support services, and
- availability of technology, including if students were provided devices and/or internet access.

¹ Pennsylvania Department of Education. “COVID-19 Guidance and Answer to Common Questions.” Updated June 2020. Accessed at <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/Pages/AnswersToFAQs.aspx>

² <https://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2020/05/13/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-state-grant-remote-learning-pandemic/stories/202005120117>

Overview of Continuity of Education Plans for Allegheny County Public Schools

To better understand the experiences of schools, teachers, and students, RFA conducted a scan of the CEPs for each of the **43 districts** and for **13 brick and mortar charter schools** located in Allegheny County.³

Overall, we found that:

- **School entities prioritized flexibility.** To accommodate the complex and challenging circumstances surrounding the pandemic at large, plans reflected an increased flexibility in various school-level procedures including:
 - Heavy reliance on asynchronous instruction where students could work at their own pace. Only 39% of CEPs indicated the availability of any synchronous instruction (i.e. instruction that took place in real time).
 - Alternate approaches to grading and attendance, with close to 25% of CEPs indicating shifts to a pass/fail grading systems, and 36% of CEPs using completed assignments and/or remote participation to determine student attendance for at least some grade levels.
- **Students missed significant amounts of formal instruction time.** Over 30% of CEPs, which enroll 44% of students in Allegheny County, indicated no formal instruction until April 1st or later. Another 30% of plans indicated that students received less daily instructional time during remote learning than typically received while attending school in-person. Four CEPs stated that remote learning during school closure was entirely optional.⁴
- **The overall quality of remote instruction received by students is unclear, but available evidence indicates that it varied widely.** Most CEPs stated that formal instruction was primarily available online, which required access to technological devices and the internet.⁵ However,

LIMITATIONS IN COMPARING DISTRICTS VS. CHARTER SCHOOLS

In this brief we disaggregate some findings by district and charter CEPs and identify a few notable differences between sectors. However, *our analysis is primarily designed to identify key trends found in CEPs in general, not to compare district and charter school responses to school closures.*

While a growing number (six percent) of public-school students in Allegheny County attend charter schools, the vast majority are enrolled in a school district. Notably, some district CEPs cover many more students than others (e.g. nearly 23,000 students in Pittsburgh Public Schools vs. fewer than 500 students in Duquesne, Cornell, and Wilkinsburg school districts). The same is true with charter schools (e.g. nearly 4,000 students in the Propel Charter School network's single CEP which covers all eight schools in the Propel network vs. the five CEPs of charter schools which enroll fewer than 300 students each). In addition, while school districts encompass every community in the county, charter schools are more heavily concentrated in some than in others.

To compare sectors more precisely, analysis would need to control for district and charter size and location, which was beyond the scope of this study.

³ Unless specified otherwise, the numbers and percentages calculated for this project were out of 43 district CEPs and 13 charter school CEPs. Propel Charter Schools submitted one CEP for all eight charter schools in the Propel Network and is counted as one CEP in this analysis. The CEPs for The New Academy and Westinghouse Arts Academy charter schools were not found online. Although school entities can make changes to their plans, this review reflects the plans posted on districts' websites as of May 8, 2020 and charters' websites as of June 5, 2020.

⁴ South Allegheny, Wilkinsburg, East Allegheny, and McKeesport school districts noted remote learning was either "optional", "not mandatory", or "not required" in their CEPs/district sites.

⁵ Riverview school district reported using hard copy packets available for pick up or sent via email. Shaler, Montour, and McKeesport Area school districts did not clearly indicate primary platform for delivering instruction in plan.

neither were universally accessible. Leading into the school closures, only 41% of districts reported the availability in any grade levels of 1:1 student device ratios to assist in delivering instruction. Sixty-one percent of CEPs indicated that the district or charter school provided some type of internet assistance for students/families.

- **In general, plans only provided vague descriptions of the extent to which schools would provide special education and other student support services** to meet the needs of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), students with a Gifted Individual Education Plan (GIEPs), or English learners. A majority of district and charter CEPs mentioned opportunities to contact teachers outside of instruction, through office hours (via virtual space such as Zoom or phone conversations) and/or email exchange between teacher and student or teacher and family. Nearly half of CEPs specifically mentioned the heightened need to provide mental health supports during this time, largely for students receiving special education. Only four out of the 56 total CEPs made any mention of providing services to students experiencing homelessness or students in foster care.
- **CEPs reflected disparities by student race and poverty.** Districts whose CEPs indicated greater learning opportunities during COVID-19 served lower rates of students with economic disadvantage and students of color than districts whose CEPs indicated fewer learning opportunities.

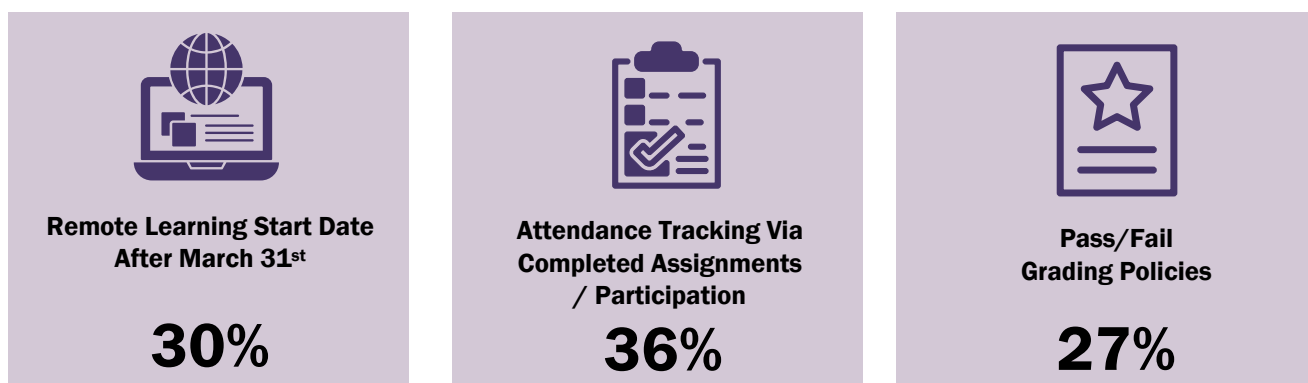
Below we detail trends found in our review of CEPs for Allegheny County school entities. Specifically, we discuss how school entities planned to provide a continuity of education through changes in both **(1) administrative alterations** and **(2) adjustments to instruction**.

A spreadsheet containing details of our review of the CEP for each individual school entity is also available for download at researchforaction.org/continuity.

Administrative Alterations

School closures for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year caused all schools to alter their systems for instructional days, attendance, and grading policies. Figure 1 provides a summary of administrative alterations reflected in CEPs and more detailed findings are discussed below.

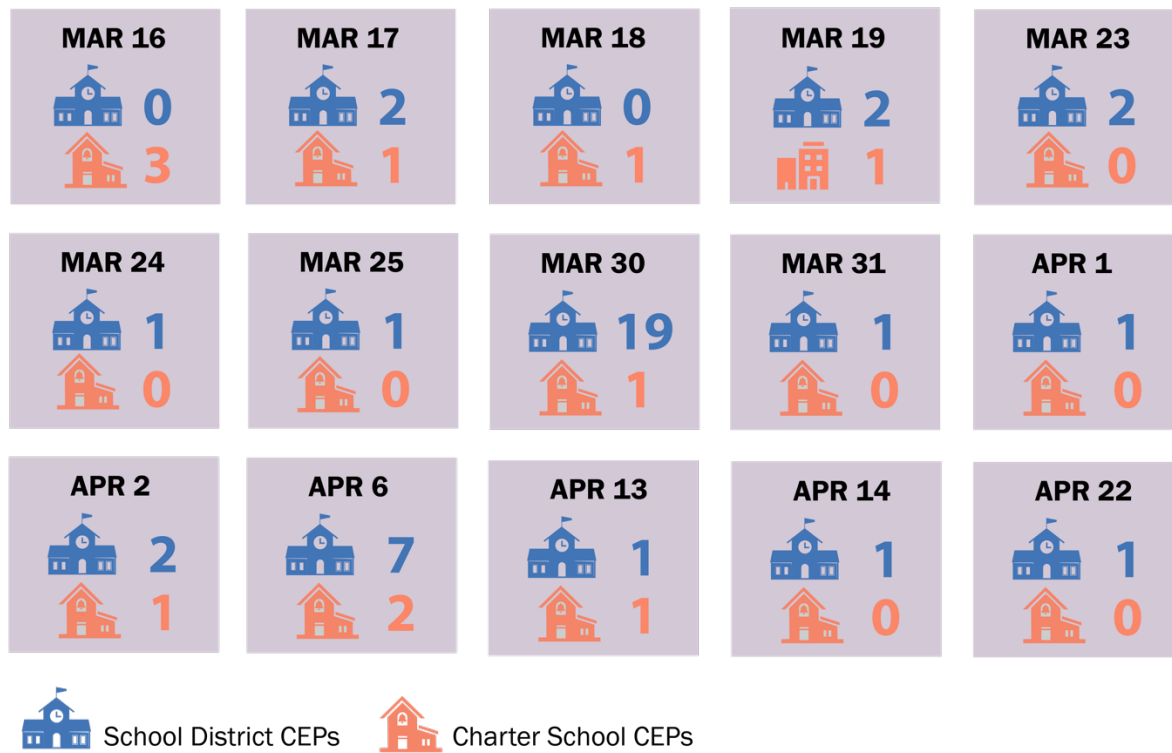
Figure 1. Summary of Administrative Alterations in District and Charter School CEPs



Remote learning start date

Gaps between the March 16 date of school closure and the official start to remote learning varied across school districts and charter schools, as show in Figure 2.⁶ Some schools immediately began remote instruction the first week of closure while others did not begin until mid-to late April. Over 30% of CEPs, covering 44% of students in Allegheny County, indicated no formal instruction until at least April 1. Six charters noted a distinction between general start date for review material and a start date for new content or live instruction.⁷ For example, Propel Charter School’s CEP reported a review and enrichment distance learning effective April 6th and planned instruction “anticipated late April.” Similarly, Young Scholars of McKeesport’s CEP reported general remote instruction starting March 16th but remote instruction with live classes starting April 13th.

Figure 2. Start Dates for Remote Learning in Allegheny County



Attendance tracking

Districts and charter schools reported two main measures of attendance tracking:

- 1) Student or family reporting via an online form or student check-in through a platform (such as Canvas or Google Classroom)
- 2) Assignment completion or remote learning participation

Table 1 displays the number of districts and charter schools using each of these attendance measures.

⁶ Not all districts and charter schools included the official start date for remote instruction in their plans; for these districts, we scanned district and charter websites, calendars, and Facebook pages to find the official start date. Two district and two charter start dates were not found.

⁷ Penn Hills CS of Entrepreneurship, Propel CS, Environmental CS, Provident CS, Young Scholars of McKeesport and Young Scholars of Western PA noted a distinction between a review start date and planned instruction start date.

Table 1. Attendance Measures

Attendance Measure	Online form/check-in	Completed Assignments/ Participation	Combination	Not indicated
School District CEPs	23	14	4	2
Charter School CEPs	6	2	0	5

Grading policies

Nearly half of districts and charters did not specify grading policies during remote learning in their CEPs. Of those that included grading policies in their plan, nearly half of both district and charter CEPs reported shifting to a binary pass/fail grading system. Although exact requirements varied by district or charter school, these pass/fail grading systems largely emphasized assignment completion rather than accuracy. Four districts made remote learning entirely optional.⁸

Table 2 displays the distribution of remote learning grading systems across Allegheny County districts and charters.⁹

Table 2. Grading policies

Grading System	Pass/Fail	Graded	Combination	Other	Not indicated or undecided
School District CEPs	8	6	3	4	22
Charter School CEPs	2	2	2	2	5

Adjustments to Instruction

Allegheny County districts and charter schools reported shifting four areas of instruction:

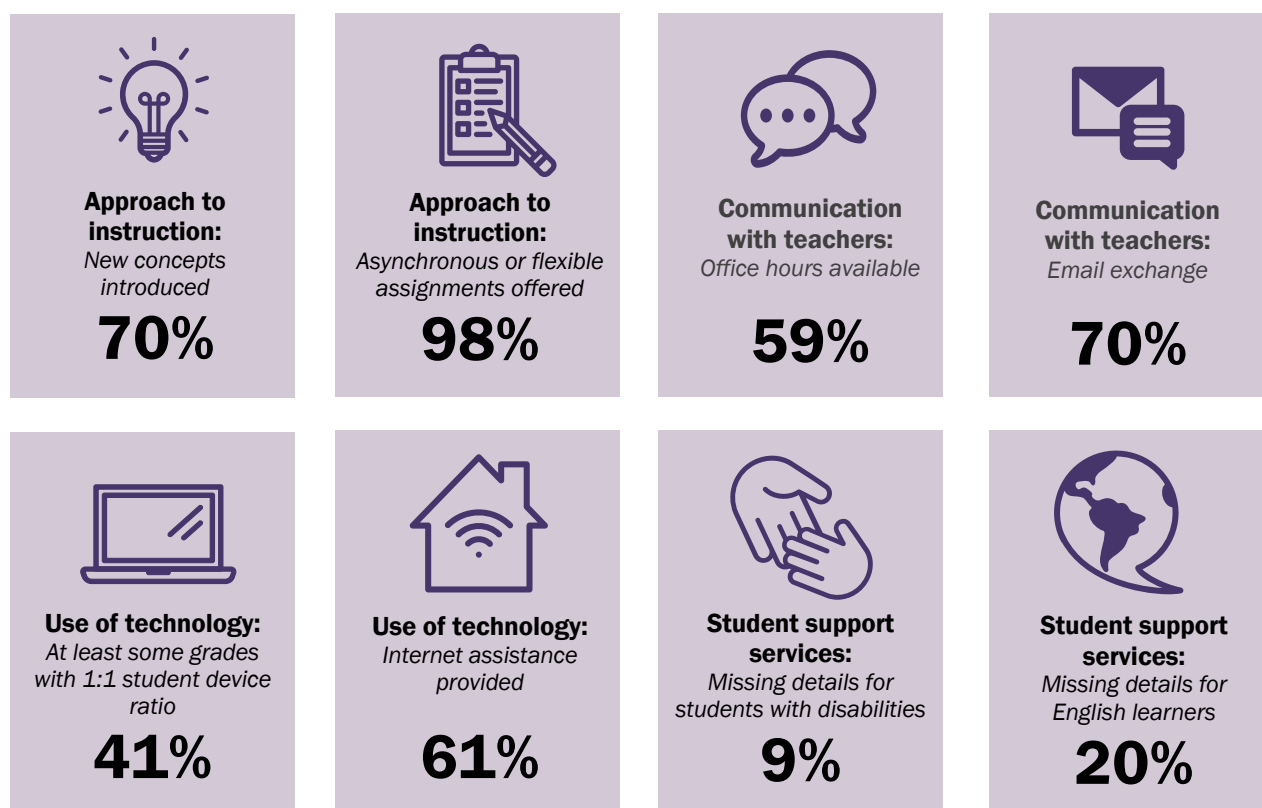
- Approach to instruction
- Communication with teachers
- Use of technology
- Student support services

Figure 3 summarizes these changes with more detailed findings discussed below.

⁸ South Allegheny, Wilkinsburg, East Allegheny, and McKeesport school districts noted remote learning was “optional”, “not mandatory”, or “not required” in their CEPs/district sites.

⁹ Other includes: continuation of 3rd quarter grades, 3rd quarter grades carried over and could only be brought up during remote learning, grades determined by teachers’ discretion, and descriptive feedback but no grades given.

Figure 3. Summary of Adjustments to Instruction in District and Charter CEPs



Approach to Instruction

Instructional content. Nearly all CEPs that included information about instructional content indicated plans to introduce new concepts. Only two CEPs—Steel Valley and Moon Area school districts—reported that their instructional content would consist only of reviewing previously taught concepts. The plan for Steel Valley stated that “the introduction of new concepts may lead to frustration and stress for both the teacher and the learner. Solidifying the skills gained before the closure order on March 13 is extremely important.”

Of the 39 CEPs introducing new content during this time, six districts and one charter school reported identifying “essential” or “key” concepts that would be introduced remotely.¹⁰ Upper St. Clair, for example, noted “Teachers in grades K-12 will identify the ‘essential learnings’ for the time of the extended closure” while North Hills stated “the curriculum is still the roadmap for teaching and learning; however, the focus is on the most essential elements of the curriculum.” This indicates that even in districts and charters that planned to introduce some new content, many introduced less than they would under normal circumstances.

Table 3 displays the type of instructional content delivered in Allegheny County school districts and charters as reported in each CEP.

¹⁰ Brentwood Borough, Bethel Park, North Hills, Shaler, South Park, Upper Saint Clair, and Young Scholars of McKeesport identified “essential” or “key” concepts

Table 3. Instructional Content

	New concepts introduced	Review only	Not indicated
School District CEPs	27	2	14
Charter School CEPs	12	0	1

Learning structure. Nearly all districts and charters indicated that they would be providing some level of asynchronous instruction defined as instruction that does not include real time interaction. Asynchronous instruction occurs within a flexible timeframe, and therefore students can engage at their own pace. Offerings included slideshow presentations with narrations, educational technology assignments, pre-recorded video lessons, and other assignments. Rationales for this approach included flexibility and an understanding of unusual demands amidst the pandemic. For example, Mount Lebanon stated, “The district is sensitive to the evolving faculty, staff, and family situations in our community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and wants to provide an educational experience for our students, faculty, and staff that furthers continuity of instruction while being understanding and flexible in nature.”

Close to 35% of districts and over half of charters reported providing some *synchronous* learning opportunities. Synchronous instruction occurs in real time and requires adherence to a set schedule. Offerings included small group instruction via video conference, screen sharing to demonstrate concepts/skills, one-on-one video tutoring sessions, and providing additional support in real-time. Synchronous instruction was often reported as an additional or occasional offering; no district or charter school plan reported primarily using synchronous learning methods. For example, Pittsburgh Public Schools described the district’s service delivery model as “a blend of asynchronous and synchronous learning,” noting that “most instruction will be asynchronous where teachers will post assignments and tasks online for students to complete at their own pace.”

Table 4 displays learning structures described in CEPs.

Table 4. Asynchronous vs. Synchronous Instruction

	Asynchronous Instruction	Synchronous Instruction	Combination Async/Sync	Not indicated
School District CEPs	27	0	15	1
Charter School CEPs	6	0	7	0

Close to 30% of both districts and charter CEPs recommended a cap on instructional time for students by using language such as “not to exceed” for daily instructional time.¹¹ These caps varied from no more than a half hour to no more than 2.5 hours. Two school districts had hard caps for middle and high school students as well, between 2.5 to 3 hours a day total.

Communication with teachers

Nearly all districts and charter schools reported offering additional opportunities for students and families to communicate with teachers. As shown in Table 5, communication methods included virtual office hours, email exchanges, personalized communication through online platforms, and phone conversations.

¹¹ Baldwin-Whitehall, Brentwood Borough, Carlynton, Chartiers Valley, East Allegheny, Highlands, Plum, Quaker Valley, Shaler, South Fayette, Upper St. Clair, West Allegheny, West Jefferson Hills, Provident, Propel, City High, and Environmental Charter School provided an instructional time cap for students.

- **Office hours:** Fifty-three percent of districts and 76% of charters reported holding office hours on a regular basis. Some CEPs indicated that teachers would set daily office hours or set hours 2-3 days a week. Some CEPs described office hours as an opportunity to provide synchronous learning opportunities, answer questions, and provide more detailed feedback. Others described office hours as set times for teachers to respond to phone calls/texts/emails.
- **Email exchanges:** Seventy percent of both districts and charters also reported that teachers would provide support via email exchanges, communicating with students and/or guardians. Expectations for a teacher's response time varied across CEPs; for example, some stated that teachers would respond to emails within 60 minutes during school hours and others within 24 hours during weekdays.
- **Personalized communication through online platforms:** Nearly half of all plans reported that teachers would provide feedback through messaging, comments, and discussion boards directly within platforms.

A few plans noted additional teacher support more vaguely, stating, for example, that “teachers will provide regular feedback.”

Table 5. Additional teacher contact

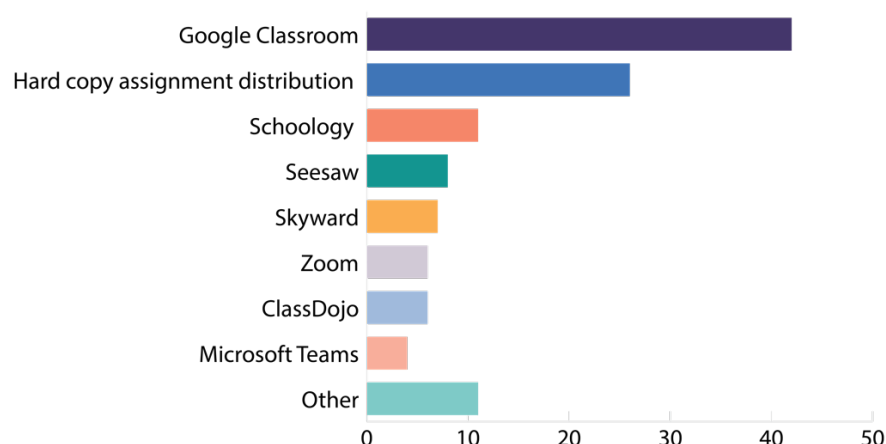
	Teacher office hours	Teacher Email	Feedback through platforms	Phone	Not indicated
School District CEPs	23	30	21	5	2
Charter School CEPs	10	9	6	2	0

Most CEPs indicated multiple ways to contact teachers.

Use of technology

Platforms for instruction. All but four districts reported primarily using online platforms to deliver remote instruction.¹² Google Classroom was by far the most used platform; 31 districts and 11 charters reported using the platform. Figure 4 displays how commonly each digital platform was used according to district and charter CEPs.

Figure 4. Platforms used by District and Charter CEPs



Some CEPs indicated using more than one platform.

¹² Riverview school district reported using hard copy packets available for pick up or sent via email. Shaler, Montour, and McKeesport Area school districts did not clearly indicate primary platform for delivering instruction in plan.

Almost half of CEPs reported offering hard copy assignment distribution, meaning that assignments were to be picked up at the school or sent via email. CEPs indicated that these strategies were used because many students had limited access to technological devices and internet in their communities. Riverview School District reported hard copy assignments as the primary mode of schooling for students by stating “Instructional lessons will be delivered through email and hard copy learning packets.”

Technological devices. Table 6 displays information about technological devices that districts and charters reported using during remote learning in their CEPs. A one-to-one (1:1) student-to-device ratio means that each student in that district or school was provided a technological device (e.g., Chromebooks, iPads) to support instruction.

Table 6. Technological devices

	1:1 for all grades	1:1 for some grades	Some Device distribution	Not Indicated
School District CEPs	7	11	25	3
Charter School CEPs	4	1	9	0

Some CEPs indicated 1:1 devices in some grades along with additional device distribution.

Approximately 20% of districts and charter schools reported 1:1 device ratios for all grade levels. Another 25% of districts and one charter school reported that at least some grade levels had 1:1 device ratios. Districts with 1:1 for some grades concentrated the availability of devices in high schools and/or middle schools.

Twenty-five districts and nine charters without 1:1 device ratios noted a process for distributing at least some devices to students. Some districts and charters indicated that they sent out surveys to ensure that families without any devices at home would be first to receive a device.

Access to internet. Twenty percent of households in Allegheny County do not have an internet subscription.¹³ The number of households without broadband varies significantly across municipalities, with up to 70% of households in some low-income neighborhoods lacking internet.¹⁴ As shown in Table 7, some CEPs indicated that they would provide assistance for families without internet access, while others did not.

Table 7. Internet assistance

	Free WiFi resource list	Family hotspots or reimbursement	Community hotspots	Not indicated
School District CEPs	21	5	2	18
Charter School CEPs	8	3	0	2

Some CEPs provided more than one resource for internet assistance.

Forty-three percent of district CEPs and 15% of charter CEPs did not report any effort to increase students’ access to internet. Only five districts and two charter CEPs reported providing mobile Wi-Fi hotspots for families and two districts reported providing hotspots for communities. One charter CEP reported reimbursing families for internet. Many districts and charters provided families a list of resources to access free Wi-Fi through commercial providers such as Comcast.

¹³ <https://www.publicsource.org/how-the-pandemic-is-exacerbating-the-digital-divide-in-allegheny-county/>

¹⁴ <https://beyondthelaptops.org/about/the-digital-divide/>

Student support services

Special education, Gifted education, and English learners. Twenty-nine districts and 11 charter CEPs included some details on how they would provide services for students with individualized education plans (IEPs), gifted individualized education plans (GIEPs), and English learners (ELs). The level of detail provided varied across CEPs; below we offer examples of ways districts and charter schools reported serving the needs of all students.

- **Students with IEPs.** Thirty-nine district and 12 charter CEPs reported that schools would provide remote support, including additional services (e.g., occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech) for students IEPs. Four districts reported that “addendums” or “revisions” had been made to student IEPs at the start of remote learning. Three districts indicated plans to review IEPs/504 plans when in-person schooling resumes to determine what changes or compensatory services are needed.¹⁵ Four district CEPs and one charter CEP did not include any details about supporting students with IEPs.¹⁶
- **Students with GIEPs.** Similarly, 34 districts and eight charter CEPs reported following or revising GIEPs and delivering gifted instruction remotely to the extent possible. Nine districts and five charter CEPs did not include details about supporting gifted students.
- **English learners.** Thirty-five district and 10 charter CEPs provided details related to English learners largely reported that specialized English language teachers would provide remote instruction to ELs and/or support to other teachers. Six districts explicitly mentioned using translation services (e.g., TransPerfect). Six districts reported the Allegheny Intermediate Unit would provide instruction to students receiving EL services. Ten districts and three charter CEPs did not include details about supporting English learners.

Mental health. Approximately 50% of district and 25% of charter school plans also mentioned providing resources and support for students’ mental health needs during school closure. Plans varied in specificity. For example, Allegheny Valley’s CEP explicitly described the potential mental health consequences of the pandemic and transition to remote learning, explaining, “With this new learning platform and the changes to life at this time, teachers are asked to be aware of the mental health and wellbeing of students and continue to communicate their concerns to their administrator and/or the school guidance counselor or social worker. Student anxiety could increase due to current situations or other social/emotional needs.” Sto-Rox CEP was less direct, stating that “administration and counselors have been in regular touch with children and families.”

Students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness. As RFA recently documented, most school entities serve at least some students experiencing homelessness¹⁷ and some students living in foster care.¹⁸ Districts and charter schools are mandated to provide additional educational supports to these students who face instability at home, a particular concern during COVID-19 school closures. However, only three district CEPs and one charter CEP included any details on supporting these students. Even when mentioned, plans were nonspecific. For example, Chartiers Valley SD’s CEP assures that students experiencing homelessness will receive regular communications from the district and that “provisions are made to ensure, to the best of the District’s ability, the Continuity of Education for these students.”

¹⁵ Baldwin, Sto-Rox, West Allegheny indicated plans to review IEPs/504 plans when in-person school resumes.

¹⁶ Shaler, Wilkinsburg Borough, Quaker Valley, Highlands, and Hill House Passport Academy did not include any details on supporting students with IEPs.

¹⁷ <https://8rri53pm0cs22jk3vqna1ub-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/RFA-Students-Experiencing-Homelessness-PACER-Brief-Dec.-2018-v2.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.researchforaction.org/students-in-foster-care-in-allegheny-county/>

Table 8 provides a summary of student support services detailed in CEPs.

Table 8. Student support services

	Number of District CEPs	Number of Charter CEPs
Plans providing details on support for students with disabilities	39	12
Plans providing details on support for students received gifted services	34	7
Plans providing details on support for English learners	35	10
Plans providing details on support for mental health	23	4
Students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness mentioned in plans	3	1

Disparities by Race and Income

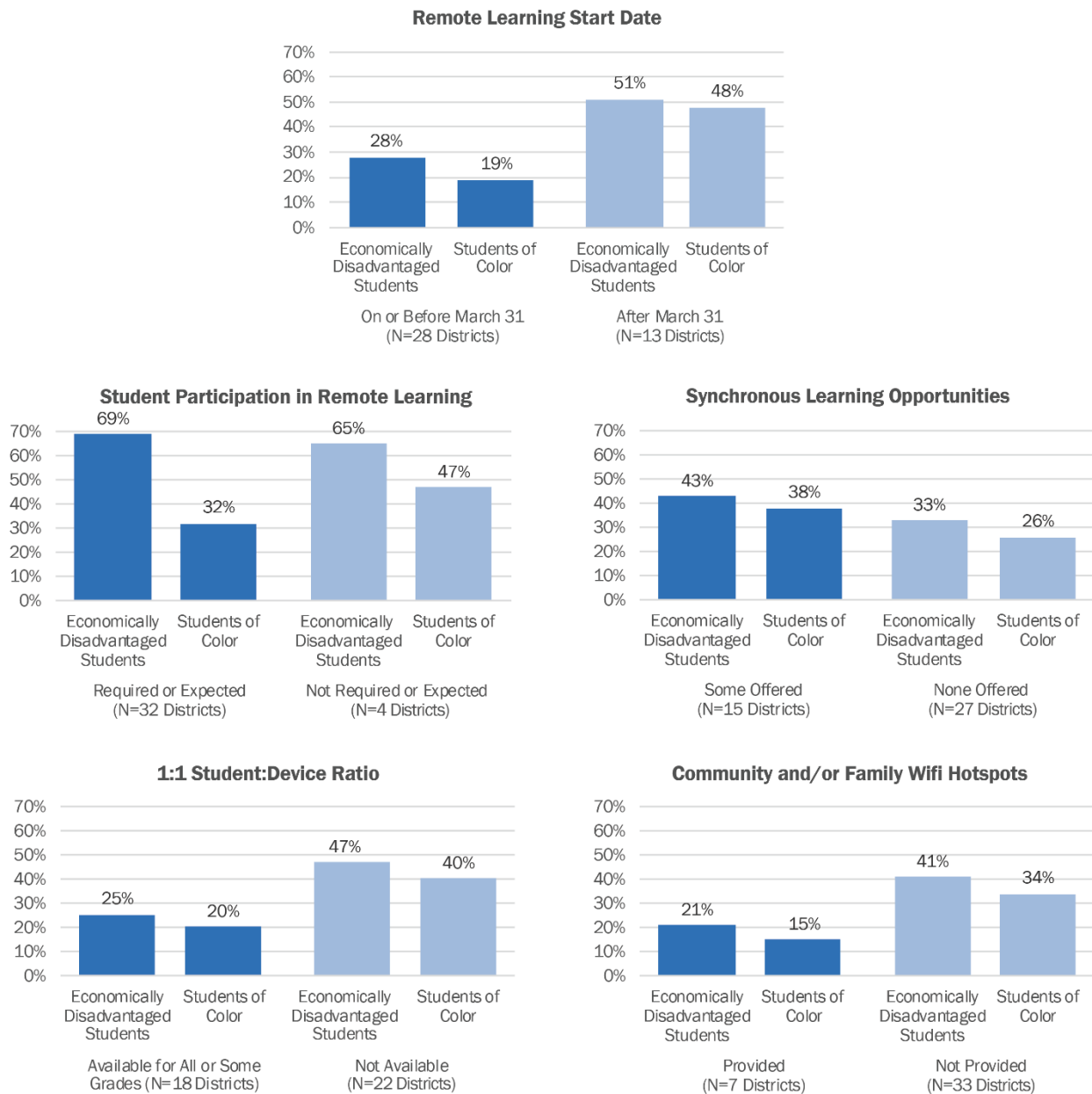
We further examined disparities in five COVID-19 response indicators for all school districts by student race and income.¹⁹ Specifically, we compared the weighted averages of student race and income demographics of school districts, based on whether or not a district:

- Started remote learning on or before March 31
- Provided all or some grades with 1:1 student device ratios
- Provided community or family Wi-Fi hotspots
- Provided some synchronous or live instruction opportunities
- Required or expected student participation in remote learning

As summarized below in Figure 5, we found that districts that provided these learning opportunities generally served lower rates of students with economic disadvantage and students of color than districts that did not. This was the case for providing an early start date for remote instruction, providing at least some grades with a one-on-one student-device ratio, and providing either family or community Wi-Fi hotspots. Districts that mandated student participation had approximately the same rates of economic disadvantage, but lower enrollment of students of color. One exception is that the 15 district CEPs that mentioned providing some synchronous instruction enrolled higher rates of students with economic disadvantage and students of color than districts who relied exclusively on asynchronous instruction.

¹⁹ Charter schools were excluded from this analysis as they are not equally distributed in every community in Allegheny County and have less variability in student enrollment by race and income.

Figure 5: Characteristics of school districts offering various student learning opportunities



* n-sizes do not include districts when detail in the CEPs was "not indicated."

Implications

Allegheny County districts and charter schools were faced with a great challenge as they suddenly shifted to remote instruction during a pandemic that impacted students, families, school staff, and communities in myriad ways. The continuity of education plans submitted by districts and charter schools indicate varied remote learning experiences of students from Allegheny County during this time of coronavirus school closures, including likely disparities in the quality of instruction and opportunities to learn.

These findings also align with national trends identified in emerging research. Nationally students have also been receiving less instructional time during remote learning than in a typical school day and most districts experienced a lag in starting remote learning after statewide school closures were announced.²⁰ In a survey conducted by EdWeek Research Center, teachers across the nation confirmed inequities in the delivery of remote instruction, including that some students had more contact from teachers and schools than others.²¹ Similarly, low-income students were less likely to have access to individual devices and high-speed internet to participate in remote learning.²² Students across the U.S. are expected to enter school in the fall with greater variability in skills and research is already indicating learning loss will be greatest for low-income, Black, and Hispanic students. In addition, low-income students are more likely to experience compounding issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic such as increased food insecurity and loss of family income.²³

This review of the plans from each Allegheny County district only provide a window into how schools approached remote instruction under these unprecedented and complex circumstances.²⁴ But these findings can inform on-going research into what did and did not work well as schools, teachers, and students prepare for the uncertain future of return to school in the fall.

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The authors also wish to thank our many colleagues who contributed to this project, including Anna Shaw-Amoah, Dae Kim, Ryan Kapa, Mark Duffy, Emma Connolly, Samantha Slade, Alison Murawski, and Kate Shaw.

²⁰ Edweek Survey <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/data-students-are-getting-less-instruction-time.html> CRPE-
<https://www.crpe.org/thelens/districts-and-cmos-are-making-progress-instruction-and-monitoring-lag-grading-and-attendance>

²¹ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/national-survey-tracks-impact-of-coronavirus-on.html>

²² <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>

²³ <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai20-226-v2.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/Pages/AnswersToFAQs.aspx>