

One Step Forward, One Step Back: Public Health Fears Keep America's School Districts on a Reopening Treadmill

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As students, teachers, and parents continue to struggle with remote learning, the latest update of our nationally representative sample shows that it is likely to remain a reality in many school systems for months to come.

Almost 16 percent of America's school districts say they offer more in-person schooling now than they did at the start of the current school year. But these shifts toward in-person learning have been almost entirely offset by a move toward more remote learning in the rural and suburban districts that were more likely to start this school year in-person. Roughly 14 percent of school districts have shifted their models toward more remote learning since school first resumed.

Larger urban districts were more likely to shift toward in-person learning (at least for the time being), while rural districts shifted toward more remote learning. And many school systems that offered more in-person instruction only welcomed specific groups, like elementary school students, back to campuses.

This update comes at a critical time, as a [third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) once again forces school system leaders to rethink plans to welcome students safely to campuses, and spiking caseloads raise a new round of public health fears for students, families, and teachers.

Learning models continue to shift nearly halfway into the 2020-21 school year. The rest of the year will likely be marked by continual churn and closures until the virus is contained. While safe reopening ought to be a priority, so should efforts to meet student needs wherever learning happens.

Districts made modest shifts toward providing more in-person learning opportunities.

Overall, the proportion of districts offering fully in-person instruction changed little between their plans as of late August and early November. Nearly half of districts are still operating fully in-person. Fifteen percent are operating a hybrid model—slightly more than reported in August. About 21 percent are operating fully remote—slightly fewer than reported in August.

The biggest change is in the share of districts offering varying models across grade levels—meaning that at least some grade levels (typically elementary) are learning in-person or hybrid. This is now almost 16 percent of school districts (see figure 1).

A significant rural-urban divide persists. City districts are still far more likely to operate fully remote than suburban and rural districts. Rural districts remain far more likely to operate fully in-person than city and suburban districts (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Small Overall Shifts in the Distribution of Learning Modes Between August and November

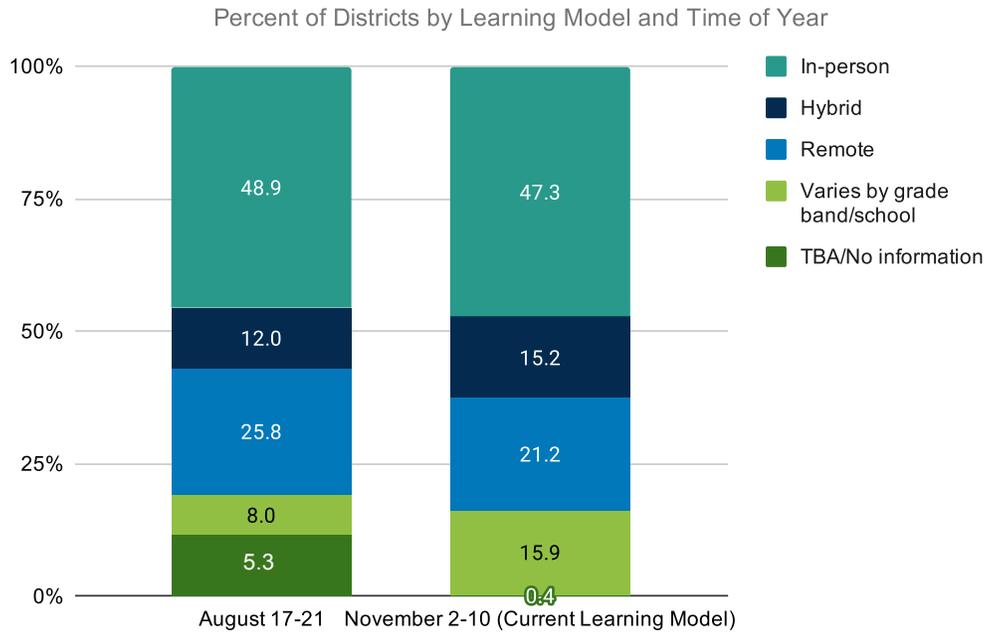
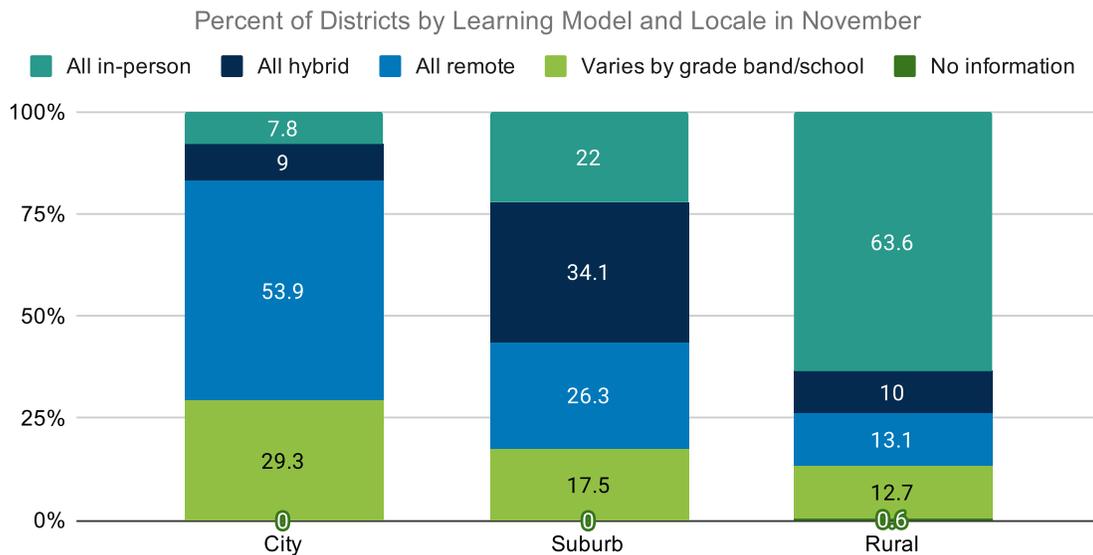


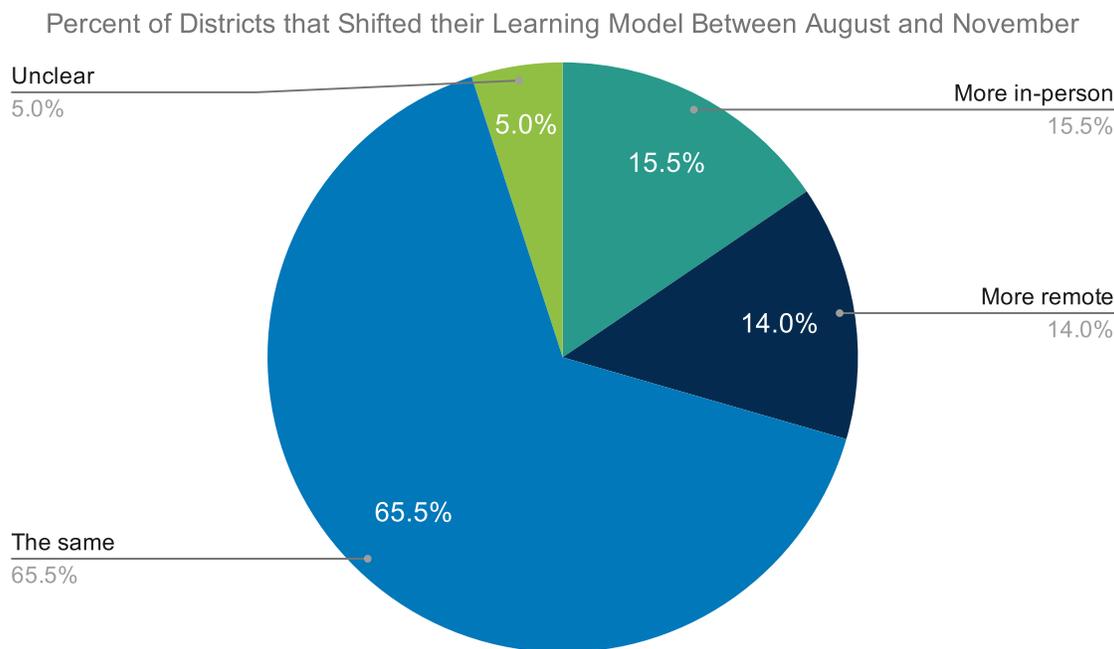
Figure 2. Stark Differences by Learning Model and Locale in November



A closer look at shifts between August and November shows that about 30 percent of districts changed their mode of instruction. A little more than half of those districts created more in-person learning opportunities.

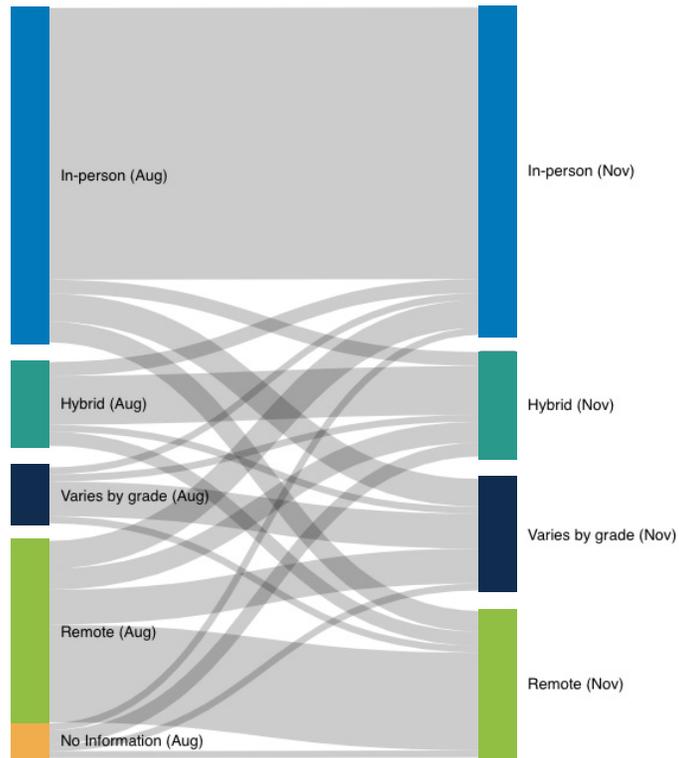
City school districts, which were far more likely to report opening fully remote in August, were most likely to shift their learning model toward more in-person learning. Almost one third of urban districts in our sample shifted to provide more in-person learning opportunities. Most of those districts began offering in-person learning in select grade spans, rather than system wide. Suburban and rural school districts, which were more likely to open in hybrid or full in-person models, were more likely to shift toward less in-person learning. Since urban districts dominated the districts shifting toward more in-person, the total number of students with new in-person learning opportunities may outstrip the number of students who lost in-person learning opportunities—but our data do not allow us to say so definitively, especially since many urban districts’ moves toward more in-person learning only applied to a portion of their students.

Figure 3. Thirty Percent of Districts Changed Their Mode of Instruction but Increases in In-Person Learning Are Offset by Increases in Remote Learning



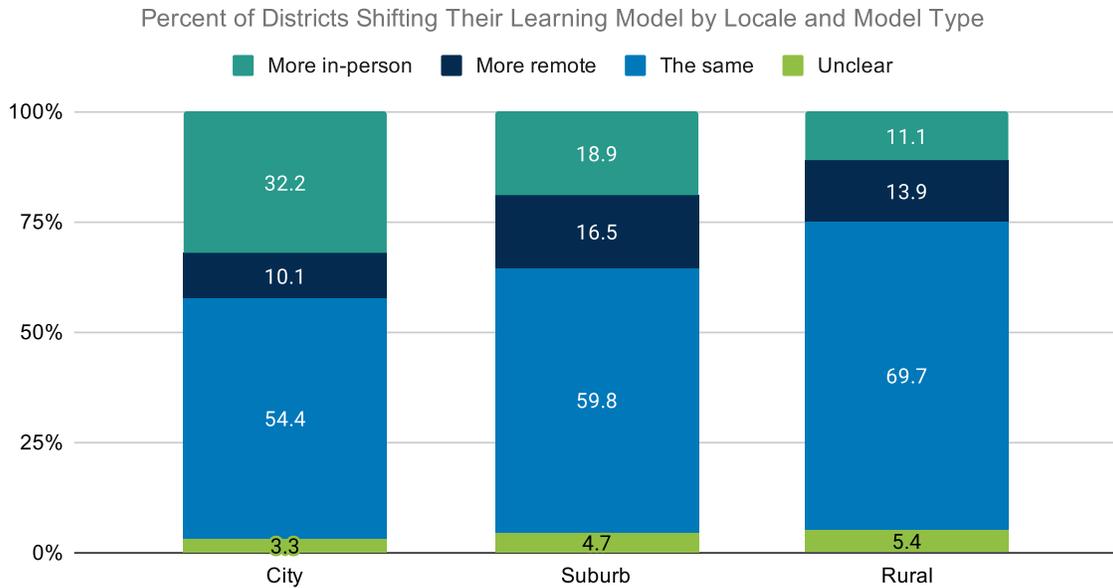
Note: Districts that shift toward more in-person learning include those that shifted from full remote to hybrid or in-person models, and districts that shifted from fully remote models to models that vary by grade band or school. Districts that shift toward more remote learning include those that shifted from full in-person to hybrid or full remote or from hybrid to full remote. When we could not ascertain whether the district changed modes of instruction, we identified them as “unclear.”

Figure 4. Shifts Toward In-Person Learning Are Largely Offset by Shifts Toward Remote Learning



Source: D3.js was created by Michael Bostock. See <https://d3js.org/>.

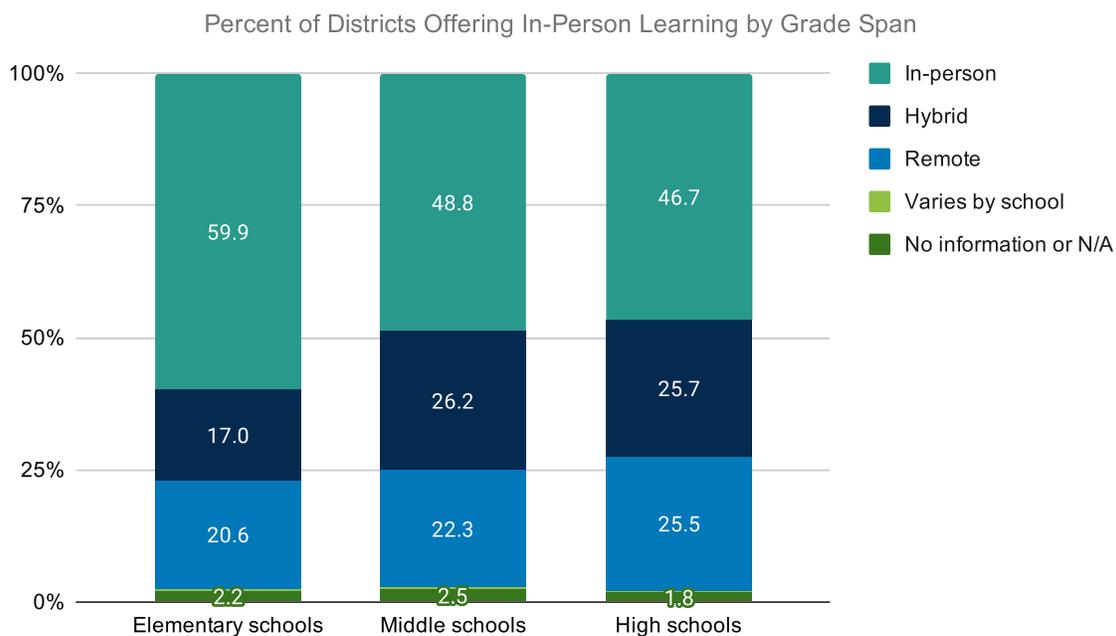
Figure 5. City Districts Shift Toward More In-Person Opportunities While Rural Districts See Small Shifts Toward More Remote Learning



Districts are prioritizing younger students and students with disabilities for in-person learning.

Remote learning has been particularly challenging for elementary-age students who require much more oversight in their learning. Public health evidence, to date, indicates that the youngest students may be less likely to spread COVID-19 than older students. Unsurprisingly, districts focused on returning elementary-age students to school buildings. As of November, nearly 60 percent of districts reported offering full in-person learning to elementary grades, while less than 50 percent of districts reported offering full in-person learning for middle and high schools. More than a quarter of districts reported offering hybrid learning opportunities to middle and high school students, while hybrid models remain less common for elementary students.

Figure 6. Districts Are More Likely to Offer In-Person Learning to Elementary-Age Students

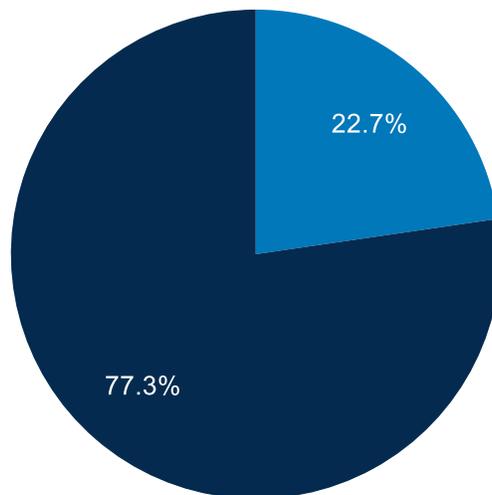


And even when most elementary-age students are learning remotely, some districts are prioritizing their youngest students (grades PK-2) or students with disabilities for in-person learning. Of the school districts operating hybrid or remote models, 22.7 percent provide some sort of priority access for their youngest students (grades PK-2). This is most common in urban districts, which, in general, are more likely to be otherwise remote learning.

Figure 7. Districts Operating Full Remote or Hybrid Models Prioritize Early Childhood Grades (PK-2) for In-Person Learning

Percent of Remote and Hybrid Districts Prioritizing PK-2 for In-Person Learning

● Prioritizes PK-2 students ● Does not prioritize PK-2 students



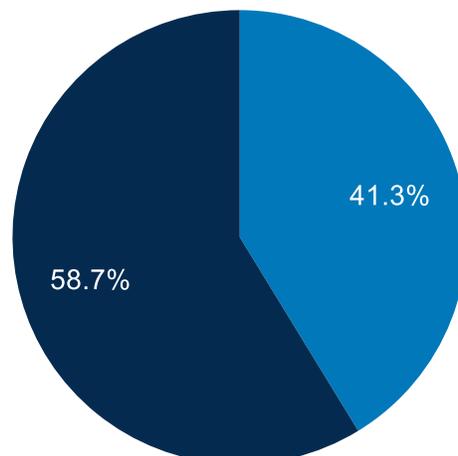
Note: This figure shows *only* school districts operating elementary schools in primarily remote or hybrid models.

Of the school districts that operate in full remote or hybrid models, 41.3 percent of school districts provide some sort of priority access for students with disabilities. This is often in the form of small-group learning centers or “hubs,” or the ability to come in person for specialized services.

Figure 8. Districts Operating Full Remote or Hybrid Models Prioritize Students with Disabilities for In-Person Learning

Percent of Remote and Hybrid Districts Prioritizing Students with Disabilities for In-Person Learning

● Prioritizes students with disabilities ● Does not prioritize students with disabilities



Note: This figure shows *only* school districts operating elementary schools in primarily remote or hybrid models.

Conclusion

Surveys of [parents](#), [students](#), and [teachers](#) show learning remotely this fall is challenging for many families. Our data show that many school districts have been trying to safely offer at least some of their most vulnerable students in-person learning opportunities. At the same time, we cannot ignore that roughly one in seven school districts have retreated from in-person learning since the school year began, and this churn of reopening and retreating is likely to continue until the pandemic is fully under control. Viral cases surging past 150,000 a day in the United States threaten to undermine the [fragile confidence](#) district leaders, teachers, and parents were gaining in expanded in-person learning.

As the virus makes a resurgence, it may not be realistic to pin all our hopes on in-person learning. Though in-person instruction ought to be high priority, rolling closures and churn are likely for the immediate future. Meanwhile, students and families need immediate support.

Districts and policymakers should continue to seek ways to prioritize high-needs students but also prepare to educate all students wherever learning takes place. At the same time, state and federal agencies must provide school districts with stronger and clearer guidance about when they need to operate remotely to protect students and educators, and when it is safe to reopen and what safety protocols they need to employ. The safety of students, educators, and families hinges on communities' ability to contain the virus, and heeding the protective measures public health experts have called for is critical to allow students to safely return to school.

Appendix A. Full Data Tables

		By percent poverty quartile					By locale (See note 2)		
		All	Quartile 1 (0 - 9.7% poverty)	Quartile 2 (9.7 - 15.8% poverty)	Quartile 3 (15.8 - 22.7% poverty)	Quartile 4 (22.7+% poverty)	City 12.6%	Rural 65.2%	Suburb 22.2%
		Weighted Percentage					Weighted Percentage		
Overall learning model	All in-person	47.3	35	46.5	51.2	54.6	7.8	63.6	22
	All hybrid	15.2	19.8	15.9	13.3	14.1	9	10	34.1
	All remote	21.2	19.6	20.7	19	24	53.9	13.1	26.3
	Varies by grade band/school	15.9	25.6	16.9	16.5	7.3	29.3	12.7	17.5
	No information	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
Planned learning model (From August 17-21 data)	In-person	48.9	44.5	49.9	58.2	43.2	9.2	65	24.1
	Hybrid	12.0	13.7	18.1	8.6	4.4	6.6	8.2	26.4
	Remote	25.8	23.6	18.7	22.7	40.7	79	12.8	33.8
	Varies by grade band/school	8.0	9.9	10.5	10	1.4	1.9	8	11
	To be announced	4.5	8.2	2.6	0.5	8.6	0	5.4	4.7
	No information	0.8	0	0	0	1.7	3.3	0.6	0
Change in overall learning model from August to November	More in-person	15.5	11.6	16.1	15.3	19.3	32.2	11.1	18.9
	More remote	14	18.2	14.3	18.5	4.6	10.1	13.9	16.5
	The same	65.6	62.1	67	65.7	65.8	54.4	69.7	59.8
	Unclear	5	8.2	2.6	0.5	10.3	3.3	5.4	4.7
Current model for elementary students	In-person	59.9	58.2	57.3	66.4	61.3	28.6	74.8	33.9
	Hybrid	17.0	21.4	20.5	14.5	13.4	15.6	10.5	37.1
	Remote	20.6	18.9	21.9	18	24	53.6	13.7	22.1
	Varies by school	0.3	0	0.2	0	0.5	1.9	0	0.4
	No information	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
	N/A (district doesn't have this grade band)	1.8	1.5	0	1	0.7	0.4	0.5	6.5
Current model for middle students	In-person	48.8	37.1	48.4	55.5	55.7	16.1	64.1	21.9
	Hybrid	26.2	39.6	28.4	23.8	17.4	22.5	19.6	47.7
	Remote	22.3	22.7	22.3	19.7	26.2	60.5	14.8	22.9
	Varies by school	0.2	0	0.2	0	0	0.9	0	0.3
	No information	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
	N/A (district doesn't have this grade band)	2.1	0.6	0.7	1	0.7	0	0.8	7.2
Current model for high students	In-person	46.7	34.1	47.7	49.8	53.7	7.1	62.9	21.7
	Hybrid	25.7	41.5	21.9	26.8	19.1	23.7	18.9	46.7
	Remote	25.5	23.2	28.9	21.4	26.2	66.4	16.3	29.4
	Varies by school	0.3	0	0.5	0.4	0	1.6	0	0.6
	No information	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
	N/A (district doesn't have this grade band)	1.4	1.2	1	1.6	1.1	1.1	1.4	1.5
District provides full-time "home choice" option	Yes	89.8	95.2	88.4	92.2	85.1	93.4	87.1	95.7
	No	9.8	4.8	11.6	7.8	14.9	6.6	12.4	4.3
	No information	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
If currently in a remote/hybrid model, is the school prioritizing students with disabilities for in-person learning?	Yes	21.6	31.2	24.8	14.5	19.1	35.5	11	44.7
	No	30.7	33.7	28.7	34.3	26.3	56.7	24.9	33.3
	N/A (district is entirely in-person)	47.3	35	46.5	51.2	54.6	7.8	63.6	22
	No information	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
If currently in a remote/hybrid model, is the school prioritizing younger (PreK-2) students for in-person learning?	Yes	8.6	11.6	7.5	8.6	8.2	17.9	5.3	13.1
	No	29.3	28.7	35.2	23.9	29.7	53.1	18.9	46.4
	N/A (elementary students are in-person)	61.7	59.7	57.3	67.5	62.1	29	75.3	40.4
	No information	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0

Appendix A. Full Data Tables (cont.)

Sample includes 477 school districts weighted to provide a nationally representative sample. Results are reported as % of group and reflect weighted frequency.

Note on City, Rural, Suburban configuration:

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

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

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

Note on “No closure information found”:

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

Appendix B. Code Definitions

Variable Label	Variable Values	Definitions	Examples
Current learning model for elementary students	Hybrid	Hybrid = Schools use a combination of in-person and virtual/remote instruction	Some students will be in person in mornings, and remote in the afternoons, and will switch with the other students. Students move in smaller cohort groups, and will be in-person two days/week and remote 3 days/week
	In-person	In-person = School use only in-person instruction (no virtual/remote instruction) OR 4-day/week model.	The district offers a full-time in-person model, but students can opt for a remote option if they prefer District is using a "4-day week" model, with one day for remote intervention or independent work. All students are on the same schedule. There is no 'cohorting' of students.
	Remote	Remote = Schools use only virtual/remote instruction (no in-person instruction)	All students are learning via remote instruction, or only a small group of students (i.e. special populations) may be learning in-person.
	Varies by school	Varies by School = District explicitly delegates the choice of learning model (in-person, remote, hybrid) to each school, rather than a district-wide decision. This is a RARE occurrence.	Varies by school: DO NOT COUNT examples of individual schools that have had to closure due to COVID-19 cases; this is counted as a remote contingency. We are coding for the district-wide plan for the 'default' for most schools.
	No information	No information = No information about COVID-19 related to Fall 2020 can be found	
Current learning model for middle school grades	Hybrid	Hybrid = Schools use a combination of in-person and virtual/remote instruction	Some students will be in person in mornings, and remote in the afternoons, and will switch with the other students. Students move in smaller cohort groups, and will be in-person two days/week and remote 3 days/week
	In-person	In-person = School use only in-person instruction (no virtual/remote instruction)	The district offers a full-time in-person model, but students can opt for a remote option if they prefer OR, district is in-person 4 days/week, with one day remote.
	Remote	Remote = Schools use only virtual/remote instruction (no in-person instruction)	All students are learning via remote instruction, or only a small group of students (i.e. special populations) may be learning in-person.
	Varies by school	Varies by School = District explicitly delegates the choice of learning model (in-person, remote, hybrid) to each school, rather than a district-wide decision. This is a RARE occurrence.	Varies by school: DO NOT COUNT examples of individual schools that have had to closure due to COVID-19 cases; this is counted as a remote contingency. We are coding for the district-wide plan for the 'default' for most schools.
	No information	No information = No information about COVID-19 related to Fall 2020 can be found	
Current learning model for high school students	Hybrid	Hybrid = Schools use a combination of in-person and virtual/remote instruction	Some students will be in person in mornings, and remote in the afternoons, and will switch with the other students. Students move in smaller cohort groups, and will be in-person two days/week and remote 3 days/week
	In-person	In-person = School use only in-person instruction (no virtual/remote instruction)	The district offers a full-time in-person model, but students can opt for a remote option if they prefer OR, district is in-person 4 days/week, with one day remote.
	Remote	Remote = Schools use only virtual/remote instruction (no in-person instruction)	All students are learning via remote instruction, or only a small group of students (i.e. special populations) may be learning in-person.
	Varies by school	Varies by School = District explicitly delegates the choice of learning model (in-person, remote, hybrid) to each school, rather than a district-wide decision. This is a RARE occurrence.	Varies by school: DO NOT COUNT examples of individual schools that have had to closure due to COVID-19 cases; this is counted as a remote contingency. We are coding for the district-wide plan for the 'default' for most schools.
	No information	No information = No information about COVID-19 related to Fall 2020 can be found	

District provides full-time remote "home choice" option	Yes	Yes = District provides full-time remote learning option for students such as virtual academy	
	No	No = District does not reference a full-time remote learning option	
	No information	No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning	
District is making changes to learning model	Phase-in	District is generally in the process of or will soon be moving towards more in-person learning. Code for any changes or announced changes to plans between October 19 - November 20 (the two weeks prior to and following this week).	District has been fully remote, but will begin bringing elementary students back with hybrid model. District is moving from hybrid to fully remote District is phasing in-person learning for some students with disabilities and youngest students. Only count changes to their core learning model - do not count phasing in/out of sports or extracurricular activities.
	Phase-out	District is generally in the process of or will soon be moving towards more remote learning. Code for any changes or announced changes to plans between October 19 - November 20 (the two weeks prior to and following this week).	District will return grades 7-12 to remote learning District is in process of returning all students to remote learning for at least a 2-week period
	No change	District has made no changes to their learning model in the period of October 19 - November 20.	District is in the same model of learning as they were for the two weeks prior, and have announced no changes to the model as of the date coded.
	No information	No information found about learning model prior to current, or no information about COVID-19 response in Fall 2020.	
District indicates that students with IEPs are prioritized for in-person learning	Yes	Yes = Students with IEPs or 504 plans are offered the opportunity for some or more in-person learning, ahead of other students in their grade level either at the time of coding, or within the next two weeks, if "phasing in."	If most students are fully remote, some or all students with disabilities are given some opportunity to receive in-person instruction If most students are in a hybrid model, some or all students with disabilities can learn full-time in-person
	No	No = The district does not indicate that there is opportunity for SWD to access in-person learning any differently than all other students; or no information	All students are remote, or all students are receiving same level of in-person instruction in hybrid model
	N/A	District is fully in-person	All grades are fully in-person
District indicates that students in the youngest grades (PreK-2) are prioritized for in-person learning	Yes	Yes = Students in grades Preschool up to 2nd are offered the opportunity for some or more in-person learning either at the time of coding, or within the next two weeks, if "phasing in."	All grades are remote apart from Preschool & Kindergarten
	No	No = All students are remote, or the youngest learners are otherwise in the same model as other students	All grade levels are hybrid Grades K-8 are hybrid Grades K-5 are hybrid
	N/A	All elementary grades are fully in-person	Grade K-5 are all in-person
Overall change from August plan to November current model	More in-person	District moved towards having some level more in-person learning.	Remote --> Varies, Hybrid, or In-person Hybrid --> In-person ** for Varies --> Hybrid, check on the details of the plan
	More remote	District moved away from in-person learning	In-person --> Hybrid, Varies, Remote Hybrid --> Remote Varies --> Remote **For Hybrid --> Varies, check details of plan
	No change	District made no change to overall learning model	
	Unclear	No information, or District was coded as "To be announced" in August coding	

Appendix C. Methodology

1. Description of the Project

The COVID-19 response database tracks how a nationally representative group of school districts is responding to the pandemic on an ongoing basis. The goal of this effort is to capture a national portrait of school district practices. Our sample includes 477 school districts, sampled and weighed to reflect a representative cross-section of school districts across the United States.

Prior analyses have tracked how these school districts provided remote instruction during the spring 2020 school closures, and how school districts planned for fall 2020 reopening. For this iteration of the project, we collected and coded publicly available information about each school district's current operating model.

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

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

2. Sources Accessed for Information

For each school district, we coded the indicators based on publicly available information. Primary sources were the school district website, local news reports, and social media (district Facebook pages or Twitter, YouTube). In this analysis, we found only one school district with no publicly available information on their current operating model. We coded this district as “no information.” For all other school districts in the sample, school reopening information was typically centered on the district website, or referenced on local news. Given the current prominence of reopening in public discourse and parent need for information, we believe we captured the accurate information for these districts between November 2 and November 10.

However, school districts continue to rapidly shift their operating models as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves in each community, and information captured earlier in the coding cycle may no longer be accurate at the time of publication. This analysis is meant as a snapshot of district practices during November 2-10.

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

We also categorized districts based on the percent of families in poverty in the surrounding community. This data was provided by [Market Data Retrieval \(MDR\)](#), and their data guide offers the following information on sourcing: “The poverty data is sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates program, which provides annual estimates of income and poverty statistics for all states, counties, and school districts. The poverty percentage identifies districts and public schools by the actual percentage of children in the

district that come from families below the poverty line. The poverty line is determined by a formula (Orshansky Indicator) based on family income and size. The poverty percentage field was calculated by MDR by creating a ratio of the children in a district from families below the poverty line to all children in the district.” (MDR Data Dictionary, 2020).

3. Coder Training

The team of analysts collecting and coding information participated in several training and norming activities, including: (1) all coders reviewed a codebook outlining definitions for codes in the various fields of interest and coding sample districts as a group, (2) all coders reviewed information from districts, then coded a common sample of four districts, then met to discuss alignment and misalignment, (3) coders participated in sessions in which they discussed coding questions and further aligned on code definitions.

4. Data Collection Timeline

We collected all data on the 477 districts between November 2 and November 10, 2020. We coded for the current operation of school districts during that time period, rather than any planned changes to come.

5. Code Definitions

Appendix A is the codebook used for this round of coding. For all indicators, codes were based only on publicly available information, and when there was no information available, were coded “no information.”

We coded school districts by learning model for each grade band (elementary, middle, high-school), and used these grade-band codes to create an overall district indicator of full in-person, full-hybrid, full-remote, or varies by grade band. As school district grade bands vary, and many districts have only the youngest grades (PreK-2) in person, we coded elementary school as the model for 3rd grade students, and middle school as the model for 7th grade students, if there was variation.

For the indicator on changes to operating plans from August to the current operating model, we compared whether districts, overall, were allowing more or fewer students in-person than they planned for in late August. We coded this based on the changes in the overall district plans, including variations by grade bands, but were unable to account for prioritization for some small groups of students, like students with disabilities, in this indicator. For example:

- If, in August, a school district planned to begin with a hybrid model for all students, and phased to elementary in-person and middle and high-school hybrid (varies by grade band), this would be coded as “more in-person”
- If, in August, a school district planned to be fully remote, and is currently operating with only some small groups of most vulnerable students in-person, with all other students remote, this would still be coded as “no change.”

6. Explanation of the Sample and Sample Calibration

The Sample

The national sample includes two groups of districts.

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

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

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

Calibration and Sample Weights

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

- Total enrollment in the district split into three groups: Small [0-800], medium [800-3000] and Large [3000+]
- Total number of schools in the district split into three groups: 1, [2-5], and [6+]
- Per-pupil expenditure on instructional materials
- Current expenditure dollar range code represents per-student current expenditures within ranges and are maintained on district (except Supervisory Union) and public school records
- Percentage of minority students in the district split into four groups [0-15%], [15-25%], [25-50%], and [50%+]
- Percentage of poverty-level students in the district split into four groups [0-10%], [10-15%], [15-25%], and [25%+]
- Percentage of students in the district eligible for free or reduced-price lunch split into four groups [0-25%], [25-50%], [50-75%], and [75%+]
- The specific level of instruction in the school district, Elementary, Secondary or Unified
- The percentage of special education students in the district split into [0-12%], [12-17%], and [17%+]
- Bilingual Education Indicator that indicates if Bilingual Education is offered [Yes/No]