

Getting Back to School: An Update on Plans from Across the Country

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Few expected the start of the 2020-21 school year to be normal, but district and school administrators across the country had a few potential models in mind for safely providing in-person instruction. As the summer saw COVID-19 cases spiking in southern and western states and eventually migrating to midwestern states, [parents](#) and [teachers](#) grew increasingly wary of restarting in person. Unfortunately, most states offered little clear guidance until late into the summer on how to plan for restarting in light of epidemiological conditions. As a result, districts pushed out their decisions about restarting. As of the last week in July, we found that nearly a quarter of districts had not yet announced their plans for the fall restart.

Last week (between August 17 and 21) we revisited the public information from a nationally representative sample of 477 school districts to get an update on their restart plans. Finally, what learning will look like across the country is coming into focus. Our sample is calibrated to provide a statistically representative snapshot of the reopening plans in the nation's school districts—the majority of which are rural. It is not calibrated to match the proportions of the nation's students.

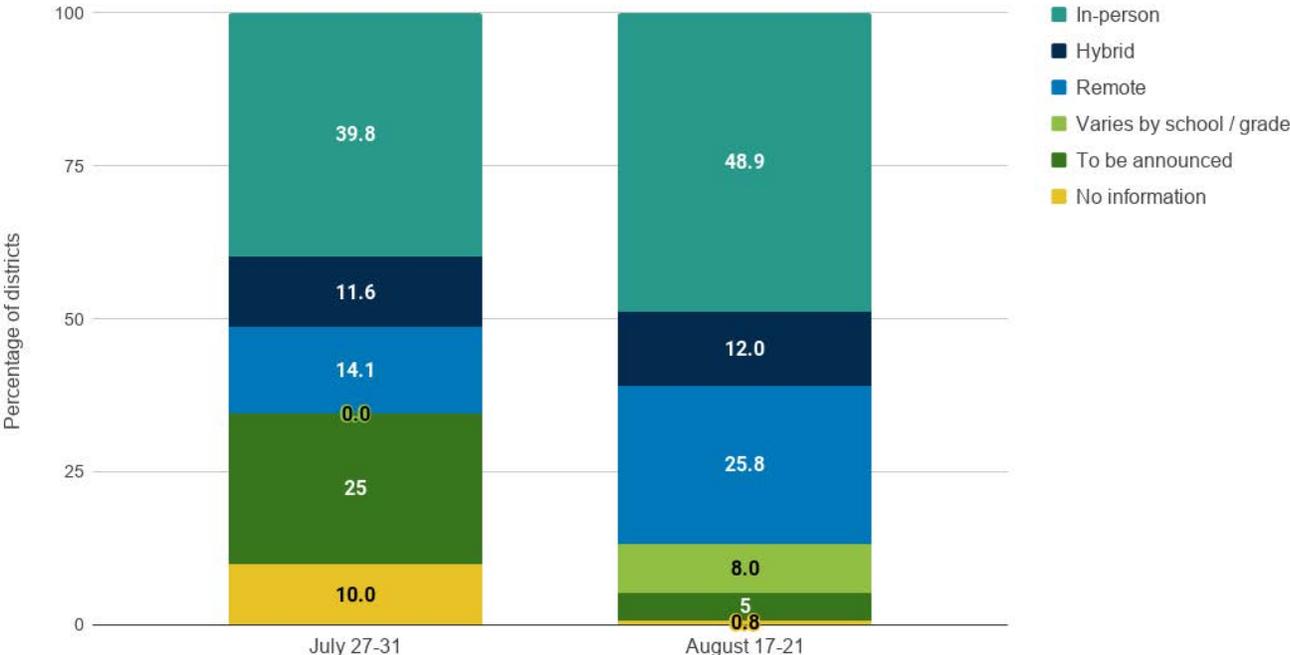
Our analysis finds major divides by geography, and more worrying divides by student demographics. Students in most of America's rural school districts will be returning to school buildings when classes resume. Students in big cities will mostly start the new school year by logging into a virtual classroom. And we find significant overlap between the districts with the highest poverty levels and the districts most likely to reopen with fully remote learning.

Plans for fall reopening are set and almost half of the nation's school districts will be returning to full in-person instruction.

Now that about 95 percent of districts have announced their fall plans, we see that almost half (49 percent) of districts plan to restart school fully in-person. Just over a quarter (26 percent) will start fully remote, and another 12 percent will start in a hybrid model, with students splitting time between in-person instruction and remote instruction during the week. Regardless of which approach they choose, 85 percent of districts will offer families the option of fully remote instruction.

Overall, few districts are mixing their models by prioritizing some students for access to in-person instruction. Only 8 percent will vary in-person time based on grade level, most often prioritizing in-person instruction for younger students. And 29 percent of all districts indicate they will prioritize some students (e.g., students with disabilities, students requiring extra help, students who are falling behind) for some or additional in-person time in their reopening or contingency plans. For example, these districts might offer limited in-person instruction for some specific groups of students while all others are remote, or might provide full-time in-person instruction to some groups of students while most are in a hybrid model, or might provide extra instructional time for certain groups in an in-person model.

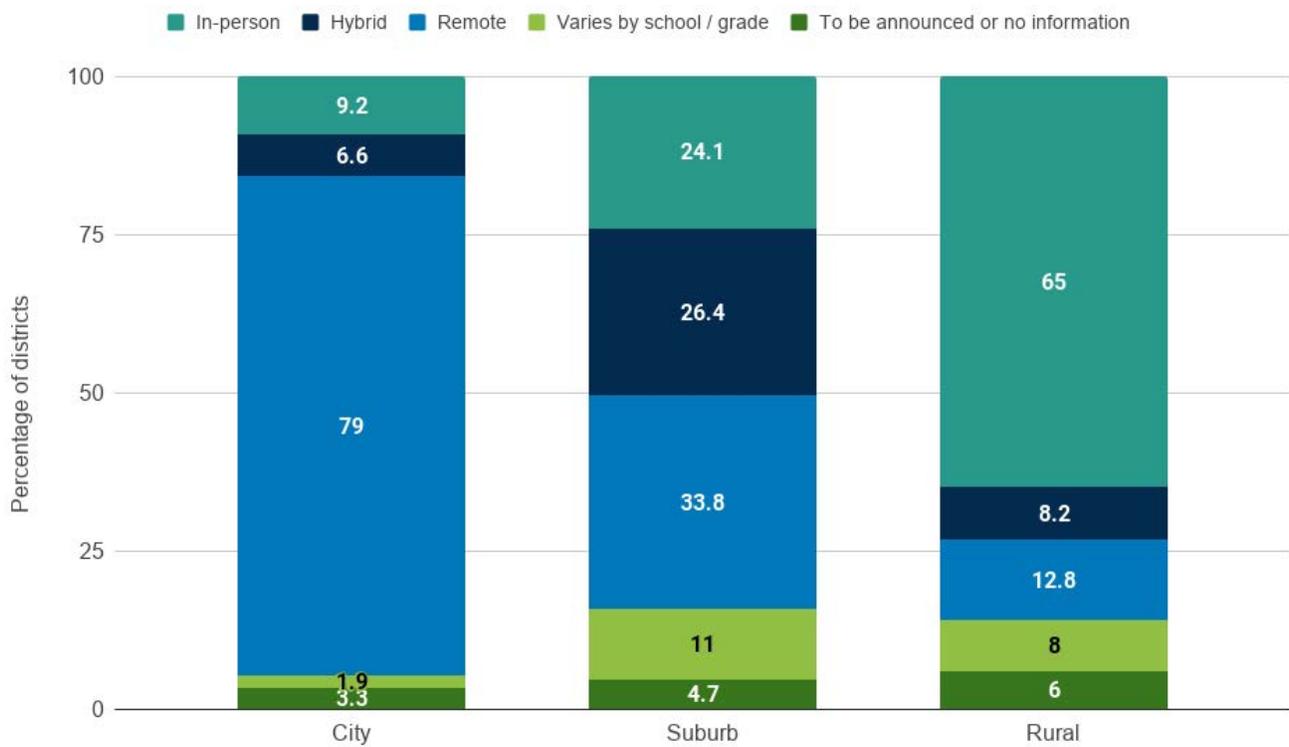
Figure 1. Almost All Districts Have Now Announced Fall Reopening Plans



The students in rural communities are far more likely to have access to fully in-person instruction than suburban and city students.

The most recent plans amplify the rural-urban divide. While 65 percent of rural districts plan to start fully in-person this fall, only 24 percent of suburban districts and 9 percent of urban districts plan to do so. In fact, few urban districts will be offering any in-person instruction at the start of the year. Nearly four in five urban districts plan to start fully remote this fall.

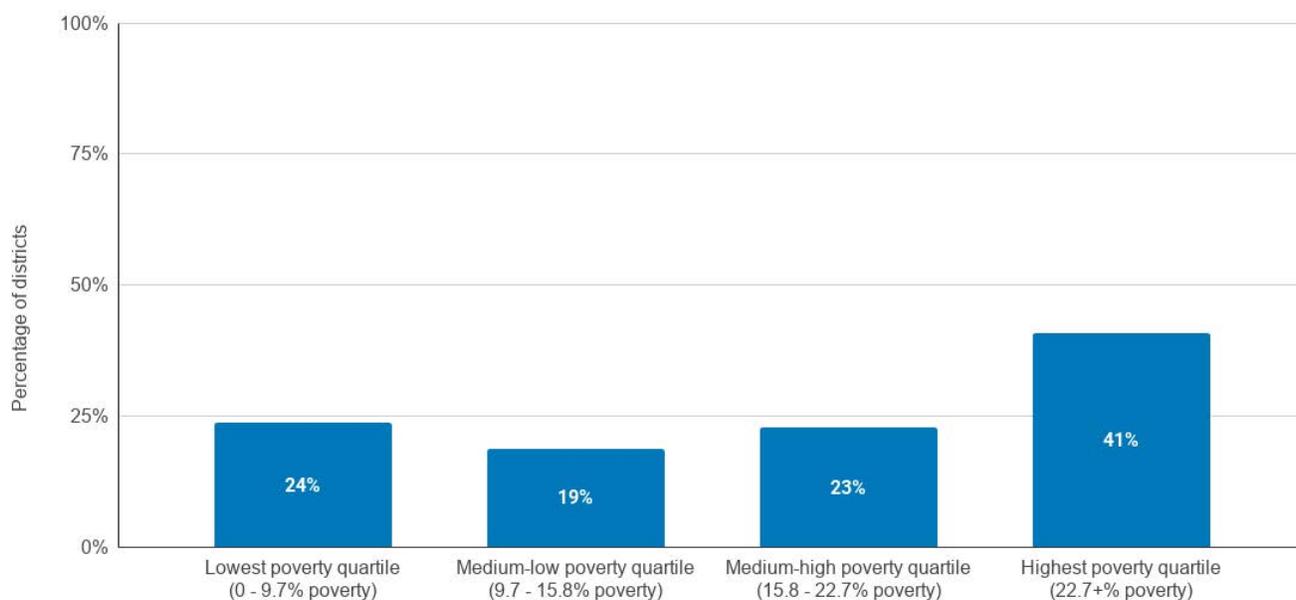
Figure 2. Current Reopening Plans Vary by District Locale



Students in the highest-poverty districts are the most likely to start the year in remote learning.

Urban districts are far more likely to start the school year fully remote, and are also the districts with the highest concentrations of students living in poverty. They comprise just over 12 percent of the districts in our analysis, but comprise 44 percent of the districts in the highest quartile based on their share of students living in poverty. Unsurprisingly, we find that 41 percent of the districts serving the highest concentration of students in poverty will be starting fully remote.

Figure 3. Percentage of Districts in Each Poverty Quartile That Plan to Start Fully Remote

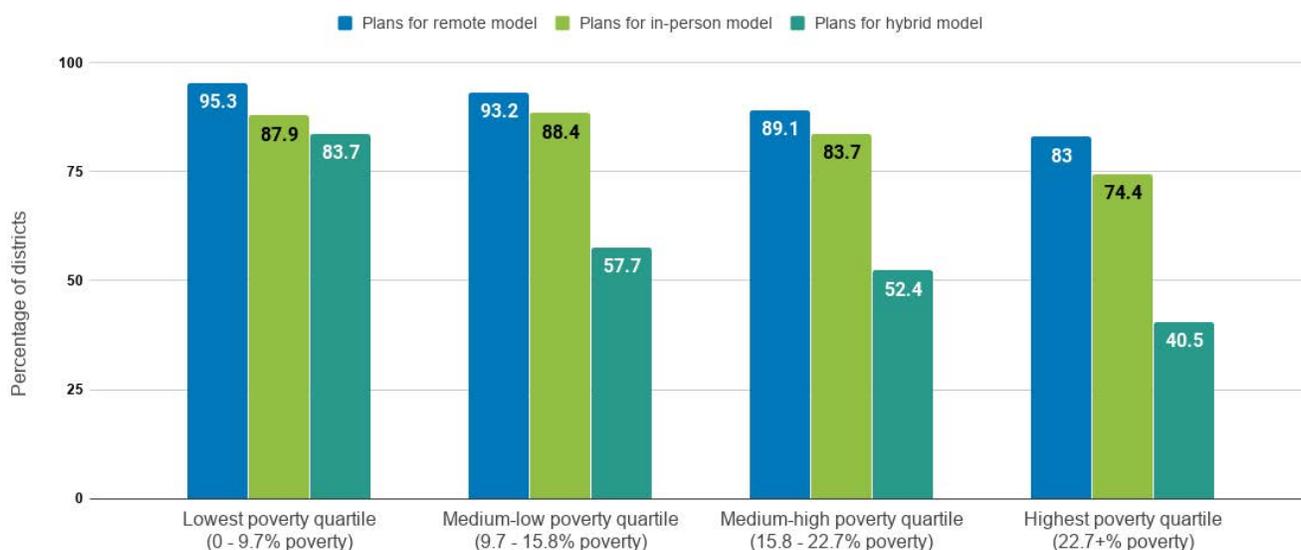


Students in poverty are more likely to need more support socially, *emotionally*, and *academically* in school. Households in poverty might have less dedicated space for children to work. Parents may be more likely to work outside the home, giving them less opportunity to oversee their children’s learning. Establishing trust and building strong relationships with teachers are critical to their success, but will likely be harder to do virtually.

Most districts have outlined plans for how remote learning and in-person learning might look this year.

As we noted in our prior review of fall plans, the uncertainty surrounding the virus meant districts had to plan for multiple contingencies. Three-quarters of districts made operational plans for both full in-person instruction and full remote instruction, depending on health conditions. Just under half of districts had plans for all three approaches: full in-person, full remote, and hybrid (part-time in-person and part-time remote) instruction. High-poverty districts were much less likely to plan for [logistically complex and likely more expensive hybrid learning](#).

Figure 4. Most Districts Offer Details for In-Person and Remote Learning Models, Fewer Have Plans for Hybrid Learning



Moving forward from here.

The plans are now set and many students have already returned to school. While half of districts across the country will open their buildings to fully in-person instruction, students in the vast majority of our largest school districts, many of which also serve large numbers of vulnerable students, will not. While most districts have developed plans to move back to in-person instruction when possible, the uncertainty of the virus and fears from parents and teachers practically ensure that remote instruction will be a significant feature of the upcoming year, not just a temporary storm that school systems must weather for a few weeks before things return to normal. The challenges from remote learning last spring involving uneven digital access, poor instructional quality, and flagging [student engagement](#) are [well documented](#), and likely to pose long-term challenges that disproportionately affect the students who already had the most to lose from interruptions in their schooling—students from low-income households, those with disabilities, and those who were already struggling academically.

The rush to distribute devices and connect households to the internet last spring has no doubt put some dent in the digital access gaps, though [some gaps](#) are still [known to exist](#). CRPE's [analysis of district response plans](#) and [database](#) also show that many districts have strengthened their plans for remote instruction in the fall by offering students more live instruction than last spring, and about half communicate investing in training for teachers.

As we move into the fall, the question for so many districts is: Will the instruction they provide and the supports they offer to students and families ensure that student learning continues—regardless of whether it's delivered remotely, in-person, or both? Because, of course, the challenge this fall isn't to just continue learning. For so many students, the challenge will be to start making up for lost time from last spring.

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			
Currently planned start-of-year mode of instruction	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 school	0.1	0	0.2	0	0	0	0	0.3
	Varies by grade band	7.9	9.9	10.3	10	1.4	1.9	8	10.7
	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
District provides information on plans for fully in-person learning model	Yes	83.5	87.9	88.4	83.7	74.4	64	88	81.1
	No	16.2	12.1	11.6	16.3	25.6	36	11.4	18.9
	No information	0.3	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
District provides information on plans for a hybrid learning model	Yes	57.6	83.7	57.7	52.4	40.5	65.8	50.3	74.3
	No	42.1	16.3	42.3	47.6	59.5	34.2	49.2	25.7
	No information	0.3	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
District provides information on plans for fully remote learning model	Yes	89.7	95.3	93.2	89.1	83	96.4	86.2	95.8
	No	10.0	4.7	6.8	10.9	17	3.6	13.3	4.2
	No information	0.3	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
District has planned for all three possible models	Yes	47.8	71.6	49.7	41.1	31.8	44.1	43.3	63.1
	No	52.2	28.4	50.3	58.9	68.2	55.9	56.7	36.9
District has planned for in-person and remote models	Yes	74.0	83.7	82.8	73.4	57.5	61.2	74.9	79
	No	26.0	16.3	17.2	26.6	42.5	38.8	25.1	21
District will offer a "home choice" virtual option	Yes	85.0	90.2	87.5	88.1	75	79.1	85.7	86.1
	No	14.4	8.7	12.5	11.9	25	20.9	13.7	13
	No information	0.6	1.1	0	0	0	0	0.6	0
District signals that they will prioritize certain groups of students for in-person instruction, if possible	Yes	28.7	50.6	24.1	20.9	23.5	33.5	21.7	46.2
	No	71.0	49.4	75.9	79.1	76.5	66.5	77.7	53.8
	No information	0.3	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0

Sample includes 477 school districts weighted to provide 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

Indicator	Measure	Definition
No fall 2020 COVID-19 information	X	X = No information on fall 2020 planning or reopening that references COVID-19 is provided on district website, social media, or local news.
Start-of-year anticipated learning mode	Varies by grade band Varies by school No information	Code for either what the district plans to do at the start of the year, or what they are currently doing if school has begun.
		In-person = Schools open with only in-person instruction (no virtual/remote instruction) for at least one grade band.
		Remote = Schools open with only virtual/remote instruction (no in-person instruction) for at least one grade band.
		Hybrid = Schools open with some combination of in-person and virtual/remote instruction for at least one grade band.
		Hybrid
		In-person
Notes if not all grades	Free Response	Varies by School = District explicitly delegates the choice of learning model (in-person, remote, hybrid) to each school, rather than a districtwide decision. This is a RARE occurrence.
		Varies by Grade Band = District plans that elementary, middle, and/or high school, or specific grades (aside from PreK) will begin the school year with different models. Provide details in "notes" column.
		TBA = To be announced. District indicates that a decision about reopening will be made in the coming weeks, and does not yet provide information on what the most likely scenario will be.
		No information = No information about COVID-19 related to fall 2020 can be found.
District provides detail for fully in-person learning scenario	Yes No	Any notes if the "start of year" plan is not consistent across all grade levels.
		District provides some reference to how they might provide fully in-person learning, depending on COVID-19 conditions.
		In-person is defined as only in-person learning (no remote).
District provides detail for fully remote learning scenario	Yes No	Yes = District provides a description of a fully in-person learning scenario, such as schedule, when it will be in use, etc.
		No = District does not reference or provide a description of a learning scenario.
		No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning.
District provides detail for fully hybrid learning scenario	Yes No	District provides some reference to how they might provide fully remote learning, depending on COVID-19 conditions. Remote is defined as only distance learning (no in-person).
		Yes = District provides description of a fully remote learning scenario, such as schedule, when it will be in use, etc.
		No = District does not reference or provide a description of a learning scenario.
District provides detail for hybrid learning scenario	Yes No	No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning.
		District provides some reference to how they might provide a hybrid learning model, depending on COVID-19 conditions. Hybrid is defined as a blend of in-person and remote for each student.
		Yes = District provides description of hybrid learning scenario, such as schedule, when it will be in use, etc.
District provides full-time remote "home choice" option	Yes No No information	No = District does not reference or provide a description of a learning scenario.
		Yes = District provides a full-time remote learning option for students, such as virtual academy.
		No = District does not reference provide a full-time remote learning option.
		No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning.

District prioritizes certain student groups for in-person instruction	Yes	District plans for more access to in-person instruction for specific groups of students in at least some parts of their contingency plans. Yes = Certain groups of students will receive partial or full in-person instruction (i.e., students with IEPs, elementary grades, etc.) while others may be remote or part-time. Or, some students receive additional in-person time.
	No	No = All students will receive in-person instruction with no variation, or no students will receive in-person instruction, or all students will receive hybrid with equal levels of in-person time.
	No information	No information = District provides no reference to fall contingency planning. For example, elementary students will be in person, all other students remote.
Explanation of priority	Free Response	Students with disabilities and English language learners are encouraged to choose in-person options. Within a hybrid model, some sub-groups receive full-time in-person instruction. In certain reopening “phases,” certain groups of students will be allowed back in buildings before others.

Appendix C. Methodology

1. Description of the Project

The COVID-19 response database tracks how a nationally representative group of school districts responded to the COVID-19 school closures in spring 2020. The goal of this effort is to capture a national portrait of how school districts are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic on an ongoing basis. 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. For this iteration of the project, we collected and coded publicly available information about how each school district was currently planning to reopen schools, as well as how each district was planning for various contingencies related to the spread of COVID-19.

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). By the late August analysis, in total we found no announced plans for fall reopening on the district’s website or social media feeds for only three of the sampled districts. We coded these districts as “no information.” For the vast majority of school districts, school reopening information was centered on the district website, or referenced on local news. So, while there may be reopening information communicated to families directly, given the current prominence of reopening in public discourse and parent need, we believe we captured the majority of plans available during the week of August 17–21, 2020.

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 coding team was consistent from the spring 2020 coding to the fall planning coding. In onboarding, coders participated in several training and norming activities, including: (1) all coders reviewed a codebook outlining definitions for codes in the various fields of interest, (2) all coders reviewed information from districts, then coded a common sample of four districts, then met to discuss alignment and misalignment, (3) all inexperienced coders were paired with an experienced coder who would check their codes against the correct coding for the four districts, and discuss any discrepancies, and (4) all coders participated in multiple alignment 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 during the week of August 17–21, 2020. Some districts during this week had announced that they would release plans in the following weeks. In this case, we coded for whatever information was available, and “To Be Announced” for the start-of-year learning mode.

5. Code Definitions

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

For the “start-of-year anticipated learning mode,” if a district provided plans on how learning might look but had not yet announced which option would be chosen, we coded “TBA,” or to be announced. If a district had announced how they intended to start the school year, but had released no other information on operational planning for other contingencies, we would code for the announced plan, but “no” for the contingency plans that were not referenced.

For the late-August analysis, we also added two new codes for “start of year learning model”: “Varies by School” and “Varies by Grade Band.” “Varies by School” captures the uncommon scenario of districts that allow each school to design their own learning model. “Varies by Grade Band” captures school districts that plan for some grades to use one model, and some grades to use a different model. Most often, these are districts that plan to have elementary students, or grades K–3, begin in-person, while other grades begin hybrid or remote, though this is not always the case.

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]