



# COLORADO SCHOOL DISTRICTS: INITIAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Observations and priorities for  
the 2020-21 school year

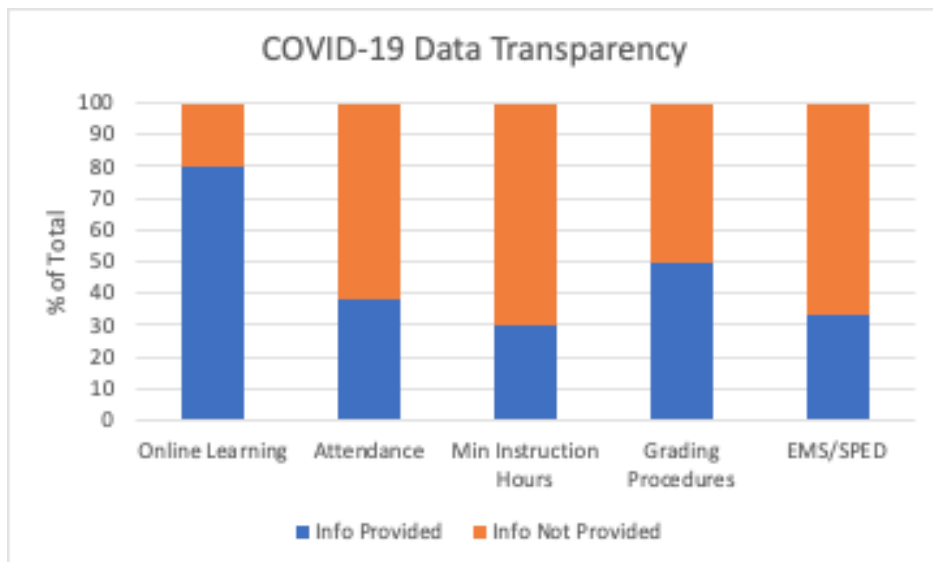
07.22.2020

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the rapid closures of schools following the COVID-19 pandemic, the dissemination of information was chaotic and, at times, unavailable. Additionally, as families began to understand the closures would continue through the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, these same problems persisted. In late May, A+ Colorado reviewed the website of 56 districts with the highest percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch and the highest number of students receiving free and reduced lunch to answer the following research questions:

1. What policies and procedures have Colorado districts implemented to review student learning during the 2019-2020 school year?
2. What policies and procedures have Colorado districts implemented to meet the needs of emerging multilingual students, students with disabilities, and students with social-emotional needs?

While approximately 80% of the districts identified policies and procedures related to online learning, 62% of the districts reviewed failed to provide information on their websites regarding how their schools were keeping track of student contact with instructors (attendance) and approximately 70% of the districts failed to offer readily accessible information regarding minimum hours of weekly instruction families could expect for their children. *See Figure 1.* Additionally, almost half of the districts did not provide information regarding grading procedures for assignments/tasks/assessments. Finally, the overwhelming majority of districts failed to articulate policies and procedures to provide those services to families and students and over two-thirds of the district websites were silent regarding educational and social-emotional supports for emerging multilingual students and students with disabilities.



As Colorado districts plan for the 2020-2021 school year, the results of our action research highlight several policy recommendations:

1. Transparency with families, students, and stakeholders regarding district decisions.
2. Utilization of multiple channels of communication to engage students and disseminate relevant, current information.
3. Increased mental health supports and direct 1:1 contact between mental health providers and families.

These recommendations are discussed more fully in the full report.

## **REPORT**

As districts across Colorado grappled with school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March, their responses were vastly different. Additionally, families were thrust into the role of teacher almost immediately as learning shifted to a virtual, online model with varying degrees of face-to-face interaction between educators and students<sup>1</sup>. These radical shifts drastically impacted the social-emotional wellbeing of families, students, and educators. Indeed, in a systematic review of the interruptions in education across more than 31 countries, the lived experiences of families following COVID-19 are consistent - families and students are experiencing trauma, psychological pressure, and anxiety.<sup>2</sup> For linguistically isolated students, students with disabilities, students with parents working in economically vulnerable sectors, children of single parents, students living in crowded conditions, and students without access to the internet or a computer, challenges from COVID-19 are even greater.<sup>3</sup> In an April 15 needs inventory conducted by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and the Colorado

---

<sup>1</sup> Gross, B., & Opalka, A. (2020). Too many schools leave learning to chance during the pandemic. Center on Reinventing Public Education.

<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.crpe.org/publications/too-many-schools-leave-learning-chance-during-pandemic&sa=D&ust=1594760952251000&usg=AFQjCNEjE3ZEiN2aoVI-D79yGKs4pHE7Aw>

<sup>2</sup> Bozkurt, A., Jung, I., Xiao, J., Vladimirschi, V., Schuwer, R., Egorov, G., ... & Rodes, V. (2020). A global outlook to the interruption of education due to COVID-19 Pandemic: Navigating in a time of uncertainty and crisis. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 1-126. <http://www.asianjde.org/ojs/index.php/AsianJDE/article/view/462>

<sup>3</sup> Blagg, K., Blom, E., Gallagher, M., & Rainer, M. (2020). Mapping student needs during COVID-19. Education Data and Policy Center. <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/98460/MappingStudentsNeeds.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Education Initiative (CEI) across 91% of Colorado’s districts/BOCES, the top education supports needed included student emotional support, family engagement practices, and draft communications for students/parents/families.<sup>4</sup>

Based upon the foregoing, A+ Colorado reviewed the website of 56 district with the highest percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch (8 greater than or equal to 80% FRL; 21 less than 80% and greater than or equal to 50%; 27 less than 50%) and the highest number of students receiving free and reduced lunch (total - 340,508) to answer the following research questions:

1. What policies and procedures have Colorado districts implemented to review student learning during the 2019-2020 school year?
2. What policies and procedures have Colorado districts implemented to meet the needs of emerging multilingual students, students with disabilities, and students with social-emotional needs?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The first round of data collection occurred following Governor Polis’ executive order closing schools in Colorado beginning March 23 and included data across a wide range of topics. A second round of data collection occurred in late May based on three narrow topics of inquiry: (1) learning models for instruction; (2) student learning/engagement monitoring; and (3) policies and procedures for emerging multilingual students, students, with disabilities, and students with social-emotional needs. A team of 11 individuals used a data collection tool to review publicly available data on district websites regarding virtual learning environments, student learning, and vulnerable student communities. To the greatest extent possible, individuals who explored a District website during the first round gathered data from the same district during the second round. Each reviewer surveyed approximately 5 districts. The source of data was limited to publicly available information on district websites to decrease the burden on districts from engaging in time-intensive interviews or gathering information through the Colorado Open Records Act. Additionally, families, students, and stakeholders readily rely upon publicly available information on the internet for the most up-to-date policies/procedures/practices and our methodological design reflected this reality. However, A+ readily acknowledges the limitation of this research based on this reality and all action research comes with limiting factors.

---

<sup>4</sup> Colorado Department of Education & Colorado Education Initiative. (2020, April 17). Colorado school district needs inventory. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/needsinventory-results>

## FINDINGS

Question 1 addressed policies and procedures adopted to review student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. While approximately 80% of the districts offered some type of virtual, online learning, information regarding district practices concerning attendance, minimum hours of weekly instruction, and grading of assignments/tasks/assessments was not available for families, students, and interested stakeholders. At least 62% of the districts reviewed failed to provide readily accessible information regarding how their schools were keeping track of student contact with instructors (attendance). Additionally, approximately 70% of the districts did not offer readily accessible information regarding minimum hours of weekly instruction families could expect for their children. Finally, almost half of the districts did not provide information regarding grading procedures for assignments/tasks/assessments.

Question 2 explored issues of social emotional wellbeing for all students and supports, as well as social emotional services for some of Colorado's most impacted students. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had grave impacts on the wellbeing of students.<sup>5</sup> Across Colorado, the concerns are similar.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, while the mental health needs of students were a priority for districts according to the CDE/CEI needs inventory, the overwhelming majority of districts failed to articulate policies and procedures to provide those services to families and students. Additionally, over two-thirds of the district websites were silent regarding services and supports for emerging multilingual students and students with disabilities. The lack of information regarding policies, procedures, supports, and services for these communities exacerbates

---

<sup>5</sup> Liu, Shengyi, Liu, Ying, & Liu, Yong. (2020). Somatic symptoms and concern regarding COVID-19 among Chinese college and primary school students: A cross-sectional survey. *Psychiatry Research*, 289, 113070. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113070>; Müller, L. M., & Goldenberg, G. (2020). Education in times of crisis: The potential implications of school closures for teachers and students. Chartered College of Teaching. [https://my.chartered.college/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CCTReport150520\\_FINAL.pdf](https://my.chartered.college/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CCTReport150520_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Breunlin, E. (2020, April 20). Colorado schools sound the alarm on students' emotional well-being during coronavirus crisis. *Colorado Sun*. <https://coloradosun.com/2020/04/20/colorado-schools-coronavirus-mental-health/>; Hindi, S. (2020, March 15). Colorado teachers eager for more mental health resources to help students. *Denver Post*. <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/03/15/mental-health-schools-colorado-legislature/>

inequities given the needs of these students.<sup>7</sup> Despite these limitations, there were several bright spots worth noting:

- Thompson R2-J was planning to offer a free, four week online English language development program for 2nd-12th grade students in June.
- Saint Vrain Valley RE-J1 offered a community resource center, including a drive-through, with bilingual staff to allow iPad checkout, wifi services to download lessons/student learning materials, and teacher/staff technology support.
- Colorado Springs D-11 set a partnership commitment with families and utilized CDE's best practices for family partnerships in the development of the district's roles/responsibilities with families.

As Colorado districts plan for the 2020-2021 school year, the results of our action research and existing research highlights several policy recommendations:

1. Transparency with families, students, and stakeholders regarding district decisions for school in the fall and detailed information regarding attendance, grading, and programming for emerging multilingual students, services for children with disabilities, and mental health services for all interested parties in their native languages.
2. Utilization of multiple channels of communication to engage students and disseminate relevant, current information. Districts must leverage relationships within course communities (teachers, peers, administrators, and counselors) and personal, long-standing communities (parents, siblings, friends) to deliver important messages.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Asbury, K., Fox, L., Deniz, E., Code, A., & Toseeb, U. (2020). How is COVID-19 affecting the mental health of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and their families? [http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/159930/1/How\\_is\\_COVID\\_19\\_affecting\\_the\\_mental\\_health\\_of\\_children\\_with\\_Special\\_Educational\\_Needs\\_and\\_Disabilities\\_and\\_their\\_families\\_.docx](http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/159930/1/How_is_COVID_19_affecting_the_mental_health_of_children_with_Special_Educational_Needs_and_Disabilities_and_their_families_.docx)

<sup>8</sup> Borup, J., Jensen, M., Archambault, L., Short, C. R., & Graham, C. R. (2020). Supporting students during COVID-19: Developing and leveraging academic communities of engagement in a time of crisis. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 161-169. [https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/216288/paper\\_216288.pdf](https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/216288/paper_216288.pdf)

3. Increased mental health supports and direct 1:1 contact between mental health providers and families. Social-emotional supports are not only needed to help students process the difficult, complex, and confusing realities of the world following the move to remote learning in the spring, but these supports are necessary for the identification of child maltreatment. In a Florida study utilizing county-level data, the actual number of reported allegations of maltreatment was approximately 15,000 cases lower (27%) than expected as a result of school closures.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Baron, E. J., Goldstein, E. G., and Wallace, C. (2020). Suffering in silence: How COVID-19 school closures inhibit the reporting of child maltreatment. SSRN. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3601399>