

IN MARCH 2020, the Center on Reinventing Public Education began tracking U.S. districts' plans for navigating school closures and distance learning. The database, which is available on CRPE's website (www.crpe.org), draws on publicly available plans from the 30 largest districts in the country, members of the Council of the Great City Schools, smaller districts that participate in CRPE's rural studies, and at least one district from otherwise unrepresented states. Since March, the center has been analyzing the plans and presenting the trends in a series of research papers and commentaries.

The Learning Professional spoke with CRPE director Robin Lake about how the database took shape, what she and her colleagues have learned from it, and the implications for professional learning.



Robin Lake is director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education. "My greatest hope with this database is that we provide an easy road map for educators to find districts they can learn something from," she says.

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH DISTANCE LEARNING?

DATABASE TRACKS DISTRICT PLANS

Q&A with Robin Lake

Q: Why and how did you create the database as soon as schools started closing their doors?

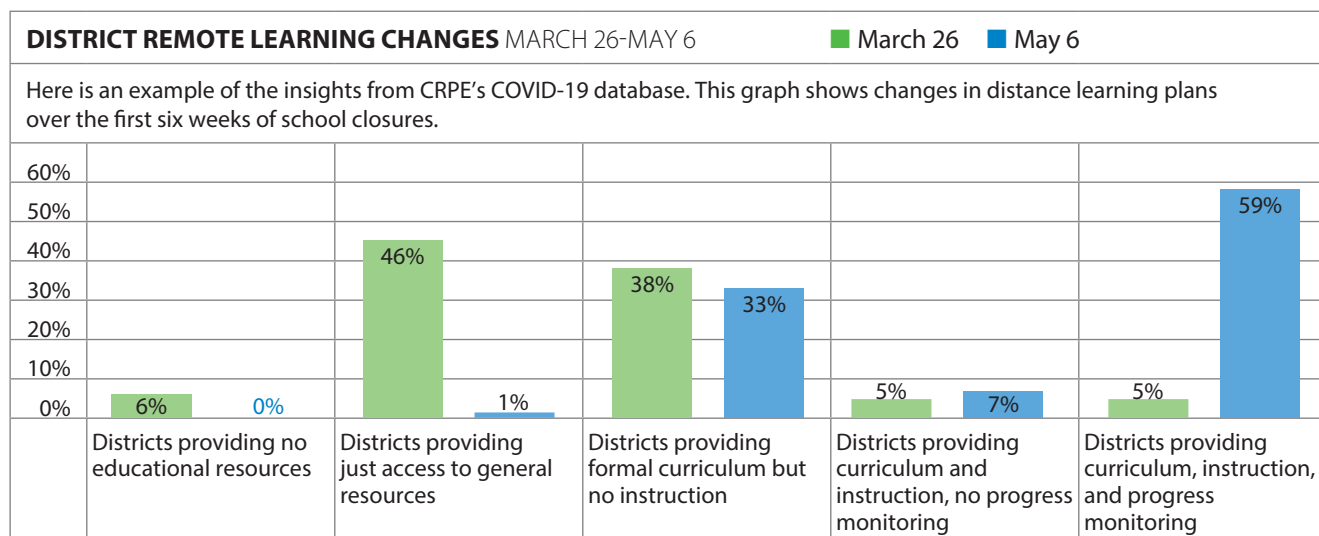
A: CRPE is located in Seattle, where the pandemic first hit hard in the U.S. We could see that what our state's districts were struggling with, and figuring out, were the things all districts would soon be dealing with. We like to be useful to the field, and we pride ourselves on being able to see around the corner to

issues no one else is yet thinking about, so we got the project going quickly.

Q: How did you decide which aspects of districts' plans to include in the database?

A: We have a couple of former school system leaders working with us, and I asked them to tell me what they thought were the most critical data points to track. They zeroed in on the

RESEARCH



things that would likely matter most for continued student learning: whether the district was providing a comprehensive instructional program and whether they were reinforcing that with supports and check-ins, their approach to grading, attendance etc. We always like to start our research with the question, “What do we know about effective teaching and learning?” and go from there.

Over time, however, we’ve added to our analysis based on feedback and questions we get from educators, parents, media, and policymakers. We’ve benefited from presenting our work — virtually, of course — and hearing what people are worrying about or learning.

Q: What have you learned about professional development plans and needs during distance learning?

A: We’ve been tracking info on district websites, and most districts haven’t announced much publicly about professional development. What we can see from reviewing the many teacher surveys out there, however, is that teachers are really struggling, especially with strategies to keep students engaged from a distance.

It’s clear they also need help with lesson planning and specialized support for students with unique needs. Most

My greatest hope with this database is that we provide an easy road map for educators to find districts they can learn something from. No one has got it all figured out, but we can’t afford to reinvent the wheel when it comes to distance learning.

teachers are not doing a lot of live, or synchronous, online instruction. I think that’s largely because it’s so difficult to pull off. At the same time, teachers and students alike say live instruction is what they think is most effective.

I really hope we’ll see more districts provide professional development over the summer, and maybe some specialized certification for distance instruction, to get ready for fall. It’s pretty likely that distance learning will continue in some form next year.

Q: How do you hope educators will use the database?

A: My greatest hope with this database is that we provide an easy road map for educators to find districts they can learn something from. No one has got it all figured out, but we can’t afford to reinvent the wheel when it comes to distance learning. I hope our data, and the blog posts we’ve been writing, will inspire conversations about whether schools and districts can learn and adapt quickly throughout this difficult time.

Educators are exhausted. We want to ease their load by showing what else is possible that they may not have tried yet.

Q: Based on your reviews of the database, what trends do you find encouraging?

A: I’m glad districts took food delivery and other basics so seriously in the early days. People were creative and committed and got the job done for students who would have otherwise gone hungry. I’ve been encouraged that over time, the majority of districts are now providing an array of instructional materials, from paper packets to television broadcasts, to ensure parents could keep their kids engaged at home even if they didn’t have the ability to connect online.

Q: What trends do you find most concerning?

A: Some districts just finally got their distance learning up and running in May and some still have not. At this

point, only one of every three districts in the country is requiring teachers to provide online instruction. Even fewer are ensuring there is regular progress monitoring and attendance-taking.

Too many kids have never heard from their teacher during this pandemic. Too few students are getting live instruction where they can see their teachers and friends. I know from teacher survey results that educators are already very concerned about emotional challenges and missed learning. We need to find a way to learn from the things that worked well and the things that didn't so we can get ready for next year and the next possible pandemic.

Q: What are the most common challenges?

A: In some cases, union negotiations took a long time. In others, it took an especially long time to make sure every

TO LEARN MORE

CRPE's COVID-19 work includes a database of state and school district responses, impact, analysis, and The Evidence Project, a network of researchers working to narrow the gap between research and policy. Visit crpe.org for more information and resources.

student had a device and Wi-Fi access. Special education was a hang-up in a lot of places, as districts wanted to be sure they were in compliance with federal laws. Every district had a challenge of some kind, and some certainly had more challenges than most, but a number of districts really exhibited a can-do attitude and moved forward despite not having every piece in place.

Q: How will the database evolve to track schools' reopening plans?

A: We are watching closely. We'll be reporting on the content and organizing

an expert review panel to weigh in on the most promising ones. Watch our website and Twitter feed for news.

We've also launched The Evidence Project, a network of more than 100 researchers who will be organizing to study critical questions unique to schools during this pandemic. We'll track and share new research across our network as soon as it's available.

We want to be helpful, so educators and system leaders: Please let us know how the research community can help you do your work better. We're so thankful for your efforts in this very trying time. ■

RESEARCH REVIEW / Elizabeth Foster

Continued from p. 18

Applying Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning could help educators reflect on how to improve professional learning for inclusive practices. It is clear from the findings that the intent of the inclusion efforts was not realized, in part because of a lack of attention to **Implementation**.

Focusing on the **Outcomes standard** could result in a clearer understanding of the learning goals and performance expectations for all students, which could lead to better fidelity and more successful teaching and learning.

The structures of both inclusion models provide opportunities for collaborative discussions in which general education teachers could learn more about successful practices of special education teachers, specific instructional strategies such as

reteaching, or co-taught lessons.

However, given the strained **Resources** of both schools — especially time and workload capacity — teachers couldn't meet these goals. This resource challenge is of utmost importance. If the educators at Willow had additional time and ongoing professional learning, what outcomes might they have realized for their students with disabilities?

The researchers' theme that inclusion needs to be embedded in and implemented as part of schoolwide frameworks aligns with the **Learning Communities standard** that describes the importance of a collective commitment and a collaborative endeavor to support all students' learning.

In addition, there was no ongoing continuous improvement process to adapt the collaboration time or routines over the two years of the study. Cycles of improvement in which educators

build their own knowledge and skills — with resources to support them — could realize the promise of either inclusion model.

To realize a commitment to inclusion, an understanding of what meaningful inclusion means and entails must be part of the culture of the school and inform design of teaching and learning experiences, supports, and resource allocations.

If the goal is to move beyond exposing students with disabilities to the general education curriculum to providing access to meaningful learning opportunities in general settings, this commitment must permeate the day-to-day practices of all educators.

REFERENCE

NCES. (2020, May). *The condition of education: Students with disabilities.* Author. nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp ■