

CORONAVIRUS & EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

PLANNING FOR EQUITY?

An Initial Look at School District Instructional Continuity Plans for 2019-20 School Closures

After New York State's schools were required to close in March as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, many school districts worked to quickly move their instructional programs online. In one of these districts, teachers offered live and recorded instruction using a digital platform, working with whole classes and also breaking students into small groups. Engagement was tracked in multiple ways, including reviewing students' assignments. This school district—which serves very few students from low-income backgrounds or students of color—assigned Chromebooks to all students and provided connectivity devices to families that did not have high-speed internet. Parents were informed of the district's plans through several means, including robocalls, and parents could communicate with school staff by video conferencing, phone, and email.

Just over 30 miles away, students in another school district—one where the vast majority of students are from low-income backgrounds and most are Latinx or Black—experienced the pandemic with far less support from their schools. In this high-need school district, teachers did not provide live instruction. Instead, students could only participate in self-paced and self-directed online courses, and the district did not describe how students would receive personalized support from teachers or whether the district was tracking student engagement. Many of the school district's students did not have the technology to benefit from distance learning, and families that lacked technology were expected to come to the school building to pick up learning packets. Despite this digital divide, the school district's website was described as the primary method of communicating with parents.¹

As state and school district leaders prepare for schools to reopen this fall, the disparities in how the two school districts described here and nearly 700 other districts across the state responded to this spring’s pandemic-related school closures hold critical lessons. The differences explain how the systemic, longstanding inequities in New York State’s education system are getting even worse as a result of this spring’s school closures. They are also a stark illustration of the factors driving emerging research from across the country making clear that students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and other historically underserved student groups are facing deep and long-lasting “learning loss” due to the pandemic.²

At the same time, there are examples from many school districts across the state that inspire hope and celebration: districts where teachers and school counselors conducted ongoing outreach to families, where high-quality instruction was the expectation for all students and schools worked to fill technology gaps to make learning possible, and where families received intensive support in their home language and using the family’s preferred methods of communication.

Such strong supports are a testament to the incredible work by teachers, school and district leaders, and the larger school communities—who in school district after school district demonstrated how New York can rise to the challenge and try to meet the needs of all students, even under the most uncertain circumstances.

Drawing on the instructional continuity plans all school districts submitted to the New York State Education Department (NYSED), this report spotlights key themes to support state policymakers and school and district leaders in future decision-making. Collectively, the instructional continuity plans reveal the enormous variability in how students have experienced pandemic-related school closures across New York State. Each school district’s pre-existing culture, capacity, resources, and staff decisions have led to enormous disparities in the type and quality of academic and non-academic supports made available to students and families since school buildings closed in March. The result offers models to learn from, as well as a window into the severe and growing gaps primarily facing the same groups of students who were underserved in so-called “normal” times.

An equity-driven plan to reopen schools this fall starts with recognizing both the strengths and needs in how school districts addressed instructional continuity while school buildings were closed in the spring. The overarching takeaways that emerge from this initial review are the importance of clear, consistent, and high expectations from the state about the services and supports that school districts are expected to provide all students and families; the need for real-time monitoring and transparency to shine a light on what is actually happening; and resources to support school districts in filling the holes in their plans and capacity.

HOW SHOULD THE STATE REOPEN SCHOOLS?

See specific recommendations for an equity-driven approach to reopening schools in The New York Equity Coalition’s policy brief, *Reopening Stronger: Educational Equity Priorities for Fall 2020*.

OUR REVIEW OF INSTRUCTIONAL CONTINUITY PLANS

On March 16, Governor Cuomo issued an Executive Order requiring all school districts to close for an initial two-week period and to develop alternative instructional plans.³ Because of the urgent need to close schools, school districts had approximately two days to submit these first plans to NYSED.⁴ As school closures continued through the spring, NYSED subsequently required school districts to update their plans for how they would support student learning while schools were closed and answer additional questions, many of which focused on important equity issues and support for vulnerable student populations.⁵ The revised instructional continuity plans were due on May 4.

were providing instruction during school closures (see Appendix A).

- **A qualitative analysis of all responses and supplementary materials submitted by the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds**, including responses to open-ended questions. These school districts together enroll 1.4 million students, representing 56% of all students statewide, 72% of students from low-income backgrounds, 85% of Black students, 80% of Latinx students, and 86% of Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners (see Appendix B).⁶

The Education Trust–New York received copies of all instructional continuity plans in early June following a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request to NYSED that was initially filed in April. This policy brief is based on:

- **A quantitative analysis of responses from all 688 school districts with instructional continuity plans** to the eight questions in the plan template that required school districts to check boxes to indicate how they

It is important to note that instructional continuity plans provide only limited information. They indicate a school district's strategies, not whether implementation was complete or successful. Nor do plans reveal the quality of any supports or services provided. The plans also frequently do not indicate whether a particular element of instructional continuity—for example, live instruction—was offered for all students and subjects district-wide, or rather for a particular age range and/or subject area.



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Interim Commissioner of Education
President of the University of the State of New York
89 Washington Avenue, Room 111
Albany, New York 12234

E-mail: commissioner@nysed.gov
Twitter: @NYSEDNews
Tel: (518) 474-5844
Fax: (518) 473-4909

April 27, 2020

TO: School District Superintendents
School Principals
BOCES District Superintendents
School District Business Officers
Special Education Directors
Charter School Leaders

FROM: *Shannon L. Tahoe*
Shannon L. Tahoe, Interim Commissioner of Education

RE: **Required Updates to District Continuity of Learning Plans Due to Extended School Closures Caused by COVID-19**

OVERALL FINDINGS

Our initial review found significant disparities and gaps in instructional access and support for historically underserved student groups:

- 1 High-need school districts were less likely to offer teacher-led instruction that mirrored a “traditional” classroom.**
- 2 Gaps in technology availability exacerbated inequities for students and teachers.**
- 3 Just 7 of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds provided clear evidence of meaningful alternatives to online learning.**
- 4 The school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds showed gaps in student access to teachers and in student engagement strategies.**
- 5 Many plans did not go far enough to support students with disabilities, Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners, and students experiencing homelessness.**
- 6 Despite a focus on social-emotional support, meaningful access to school counselors remained a significant unmet need.**
- 7 School districts used multiple strategies to communicate with families, but inequities persisted—including insufficient outreach in families’ home languages.**

This year’s school closings were sudden and surprising, and state and school district officials should be credited for the many steps they took to provide quality instruction. While the 2020-21 school year will no doubt bring its own unexpected challenges, it is already clear that schools will need to respond to new health and safety requirements in the fall—including social distancing and potentially more distance or blended learning—and that additional school closures are a real possibility. These realities speak to the urgency of

articulating consistent high expectations for student support, for ongoing monitoring to see what is working and what is not, and for transparency so parents, local media, and other stakeholders can learn more about implementation as it is occurring, ask questions, and impact student success.

The following pages provide greater detail on our findings, along with examples of promising practices from school district plans.

FINDING 1: High-need school districts were less likely to offer teacher-led instruction that mirrored a “traditional” classroom

One of the most disruptive elements of school closures was the severing of direct student and teacher contact, which is at the heart of learning and student success. An essential element of a high-quality instructional continuity plan is therefore the ability for students to interact with and learn directly from their classroom teachers while recognizing varying levels of technology access and resources.

Across the state, 87% of low-need school districts planned to provide large-group or whole class synchronous (or live) instruction using distance learning. That number dropped to 80% for high-need school districts overall and was even lower in urban/suburban high-need districts (77%).

The disparities grew even deeper for districts offering a combination of both large-group or whole class synchronous instruction *and* teacher-taught online learning courses through a Learning Management System (which is an online platform for teacher assignments, student work, and family communication). While the share

of low-need school districts offering this combination remained nearly steady—at 86%—the share of all high-need school districts with both types of teacher-led course offerings fell to just three in four high-need school districts (75%).

Another troubling trend was that high-need school districts were more likely to rely on self-taught material—which provides greater flexibility but may not include sufficient

teacher support—while low-need school districts more frequently provided pre-recorded teacher lessons. Sixty-three percent of high-need school districts offered self-directed and self-paced online learning courses, compared to just 47% of low-need school districts. Meanwhile, nearly all low-need school districts (99%) provided recorded instruction through a Learning Management System or other means—decreasing to 89% of high-need school districts.

In our qualitative review of plans submitted by the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds, only 42% demonstrated clear evidence of both synchronous and asynchronous (recorded or otherwise not live) instruction. For example, one school district’s strong approach to this issue in its instructional continuity plan included a phase dedicated to “establish equitable methods of delivering virtual instruction to all students,” which acknowledged that:

Synchronous instruction may not be possible for a variety of reasons. Ensure all students have access to recordings and regular teacher interaction for support.⁷

42%

of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds demonstrated clear evidence of both synchronous and asynchronous instruction.



AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF A HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL CONTINUITY PLAN IS THE ABILITY FOR STUDENTS TO INTERACT WITH AND LEARN DIRECTLY FROM THEIR CLASSROOM TEACHERS.

FINDING 2: Gaps in technology availability exacerbated inequities for students and teachers

Technology can facilitate teacher and student communication during school closures and improve the quality of the connection and interactions when in-person contact is limited. Equitable access to technology devices, reliable high-speed internet, and technical support are therefore integral to the success of online learning.

School district instructional continuity plans generally included provisions to expand technology access to students who lacked devices. Two-thirds of all school districts that submitted plans (67%) indicated they were providing computing devices to some students and 30% indicated they were providing computing devices to all students. An additional 3% of school districts reported that all students used their own personal devices, and fewer than 1% of school districts indicated that their plans did not include the use of technology.

Internet access, however, was perhaps an even greater challenge. Only 10% of school districts indicated that all students had high-speed internet access at home. Most notably, low-need school districts were 10 times more likely to report universal high-speed internet connectivity than high-need school districts (30% compared to 3%, respectively).

Instructional continuity plans also indicated widespread

distribution of technology devices to teachers. Of all school districts statewide, 71% reported that they provided all teachers with a computing device and an additional 25% provided computing devices to some teachers. Only 4% responded that all teachers used their own personal devices.

Consistent with the challenges facing students, school district instructional continuity plan responses indicated insufficient and inequitable internet access for teachers. Two-thirds (66%) of school districts said all teachers had high-speed internet access at home. However, universal access to high-speed internet for teachers reached 90% in low-need school districts but only 54% in high-need school districts.

In addition to device and internet access, successful online instruction requires significant support for teachers and professional learning. Our qualitative review of the responses from the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds found that only 24% demonstrated clear evidence of support for teachers to effectively use distance learning methods.

Among school districts that provided evidence of a strong approach to professional learning, one reported that:

The district is [providing pedagogical] support through screen cast videos, online zoom sessions, email and work order-based support. In addition, we have created a community of learners and brought everyone together through the use of a single Schoology group for big picture conversations and individual school groups which include school wide, grade and subject specific. Administrators and teachers are communicating in powerful ways that facilitate understanding and allowing everyone to be successful. Administrators and district and school-based support staff are looking at individual teacher courses and doing virtual observations to assist those that are struggling... The district has continuously provided video walkthroughs for staff, zoom chats, personalized discussions, troubleshooting, administrative conferencing....⁸

In another school district with a strong response to this issue:

“Mindful Monday” was designed for administrators and teachers to have an opportunity to plan, connect and collaborate with their colleagues for the upcoming week of instruction. This day offers professional development and support to teachers as they plan and instruct in the virtual world. This day also embeds self-care and wellness opportunities for faculty and staff. During this pandemic we are cognizant of what isolation can do to the human psyche so we have intentional self-care opportunities. When staff is involved in this work students and families are encouraged to engage in similar self-care such as physical activity, planning, and catching up on missed work.⁹

10x

higher rate of low-need school districts reporting universal high-speed internet connectivity compared to high-need school districts.

FINDING 3: Just 7 of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds provided clear evidence of meaningful alternatives to online learning

A strong instructional continuity plan must clearly describe how students who cannot participate in online instruction due to lack of technology or other challenges would be able to engage in equivalent learning opportunities—including through quality materials, instructional support, and meaningful and timely feedback.

In our qualitative review, only 14% of the instructional continuity plans submitted by the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds provided clear evidence of alternative access to instruction that addressed factors like the use of standards-based materials and assignment feedback from teachers.

One example of a school district plan that met this criterion included the following:

All elementary students and those who have limited or no accessibility to the internet as identified by building level staff (principals, teachers, counselors, etc.) will be provided learning packets or hard copy instructional materials. Each grade level (elementary) and course (MS/HS) have created packets of materials and resources to provide a consistent standards-based curriculum that is focused on the most important learning identified by the priority learning standards, as mentioned above. Each school has developed a detailed plan for parents on how these materials will be distributed, whether picked up or mailed home. In addition, schools have planned for the collection of materials to include feedback and check-ins on progress by telephone, etc.¹⁰

In another school district with a strong response to this issue, the instructional continuity plan included:

The District prints and mails a weekly remote learning menu to students who do not have either a device or access to the internet. The content mirrors the tasks and activities that are provided to students electronically. Approximately 11,000 copies of these remote learning menus are being distributed on a weekly basis to supplement and support online and televised instructional activities for families with and without home internet access and/or computing devices.

The District partnership with our local PBS station... also provides access to the content to any student who has a television. We have partnered with [the station] to create the TV Classroom. This new channel features original content aligned to New York State Learning Standards in Math, Social Studies, Music, English Language Arts, Early Literacy, Physical Education and Health and Social-Emotional Learning. [Teachers] and administrators are filming 30-minute lessons that air each week to support learning from home. The lessons on TV Classroom are also aligned to the content that is pushed out via our digital platforms.¹¹

14%

of the instructional continuity plans submitted by the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds provided clear evidence of strong alternative access to instruction for students who could not participate in online learning.

And in a third school district that responded to this issue well:

Teachers ascertain which of their students do not have access to technology or are unable to utilize technology. For these students, teachers develop instructional packets that are mailed to their homes. In addition, central office content administrators and teams of teachers developed 30 to 45 days of grade level standards-based lessons aligned to the District's curriculum in English language art, math, science, and social studies. Instructional resource materials are provided for Students with Disabilities, multilingual learner, world languages, music and art, physical education and health. Although these materials are available to download, the District provides hard copies of the instructional materials and resources and mails them to students' homes.¹²

In this context, our quantitative analysis also looked for the use of paper-based instructional materials to supplement synchronous instruction. Of all 688 school districts that submitted instructional continuity plans, 99% of high-need school districts and 96% of average-need school districts included this method of instruction—compared to 86% of low-need school districts.

These responses raise two important questions. First, in the detailed responses analyzed in our qualitative review of

the 50 school districts with the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds, the nearly universal use of paper-based instructional materials was only infrequently matched with clear indications of how school districts would collect, review, and discuss the work with students who complete it. Second, from our quantitative review of all school district plans, it is not evident how some of the 14% of low-need school districts that did not indicate plans to use paper-based instructional materials provided instruction to students who lack technology.

FINDING 4: The school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds showed gaps in student access to teachers and in student engagement strategies

In Ed Trust–NY’s polling, parents have consistently expressed an overwhelming desire for regular contact with and access to their child’s teachers.¹³

While nearly all school districts reported in their instructional continuity plans that teachers were providing communication, feedback, check-ins, and office hours, the results of our qualitative analysis of the materials submitted by the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds suggest that this essential connection between schools

and families should be strengthened—with clear and consistent expectations from the state—if New York needs to rely on distance learning in the future.

Only 34% of the 50 school districts submitted plans that demonstrated clear evidence of both how they would make available teacher office hours or check-in time *and* use multiple platforms for interacting to provide support (e.g., email, phone, and video conferencing). For example, in one school district that responded to this issue with a strong response:

- 1. Teachers set “Office Hours” of a minimum of 1 hour per work day and inform all parents. Office hours are communicated with parents through email and Google Classroom.*
- 2. Teachers record contacts and instructional objectives in weekly log shared with principals and directors.*
- 3. Teachers have worked with directors and principals to prioritize curricula, post assignments, and provide qualitative feedback regarding task completion and the degree to which the work meets the learning standards and/or course objectives. Teachers are required to document distance learning planning, description of assigned student work, and progress toward meeting instructional goals.*
 - Teachers should maintain daily contact and ongoing dialogue with students through distance learning platforms (email, Google Classroom, Zoom, Google Meet, etc.).*
 - Instruction is being offered both asynchronously on Google Classroom and in real time using Zoom and Google Meet.¹⁴*

A critical disconnect extended to tracking student engagement and—most importantly—following up when students were not participating in distance learning. All school districts were expected to include information in their instructional continuity plans about how they were tracking student interactions/engagement. But our review indicated that only 74% of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds provided clear evidence of how engagement would be tracked. Even

34%

of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds submitted plans that demonstrated clear evidence of how they would make available teacher office hours or check-in time *and* use multiple platforms for interacting to provide support.

worse, only 24% of these school districts demonstrated clear evidence of how they would follow up in cases where students were not participating in distance learning.

Districts that addressed the importance of proactive outreach to support students and families offered strong examples for the state. For example:

At this point, we have established strong, regular communication with almost every family in the [school district], and we utilize the method of communication that works best for each family. As of today, the total count of families with whom we do not have working, regular communication is as follows: Elementary Level - 5 Families, Middle Level - 5 Families, and High School Level - 16 Families. We remain committed to trying to establish positive, reciprocal communication with these families and to date, we have done and continue to do the following on a regular basis:

- We maintain shared building-level communication documents (Google docs) in which we track communications made to families (e-mails, phone calls, texting, messages on digital platforms, etc.).*
- We maintain shared building-level attendance and participation documents that assist us in tracking the days and classes students are attending as well as the assignments students are completing or not completing.*
- Leaders, faculty and staff members are calling families, talking with both parents and students. We are using all emergency contact numbers in our student information systems in order to get in touch with families.*
- Leaders, faculty and staff members are collaborating with elementary, middle and high school counselors, social workers and other teachers who work with siblings of students, to share contact information as, in some cases, it changes often.*
- We have school-wide Google Docs entitled "Remote Teaching Concerns" where teachers enter student information for those they are concerned about. This information is shared with building leaders, who then reach out and document our communication with families and determine next steps.*
- Home visits are being done regularly by administrators, counselors, social workers, psychologists, some teachers and teaching assistants as well. In some cases, when conducting a home visit, families are shown how to use the district distributed devices and subsequent technology on site.*
- For families still without Wi-Fi, home visits are made and paper copies of work distributed. Additionally, phone lessons are being provided in some cases by the teachers to these students. This will continue to happen in cycles of picking up work and bringing new work to students.*
- When a caretaker shares that their children will not listen to them and participate and/or complete assigned work, leaders, faculty and staff members talk with students by phone, and in some cases make a home visit to let students know we are supporting and partnering with their families.*
- We have scheduled and facilitated numerous one on one and small group support sessions for students, all to improve participation, engagement and levels of support to families.¹⁵*

By way of contrast, a different school district's internal guidance document for instructional continuity included the following description that did not meet our evaluation criterion:

It is not expected to talk with by phone or have direct communication through a virtual platform each day. The degree to which you are communicating directly with your students/families is at your discretion and is dependent on the content and age of the student you are teaching, but it should minimally be occurring each week. ... It is not expected that your plans look the same in scope or content as you would have if written for traditional face to face instruction. This is what you are doing as individuals. You are encouraged to use a format that makes most sense to you.¹⁶

FINDING 5: Many plans did not go far enough to support students with disabilities, Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners, and students experiencing homelessness

As noted above, when NYSED asked school districts to update their instructional continuity plan, the department took the positive step of specifically asking districts to describe how they were supporting students with disabilities, Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners, and students experiencing homelessness.

Based on our qualitative review of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds, the strength of responses varied widely.

Fifty-six percent of the school districts in our qualitative review provided clear evidence of how they would address the instructional and other needs of students with disabilities. Positive practices included this example:



THE STRENGTH OF RESPONSES FOCUSED ON STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS/ ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS, AND STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS VARIED WIDELY.

IEP Instruction in the Distance Learning Environment (K-12)

- *Differentiated and modified, small group tasks created by certified special education teachers infused in their general education classroom activities or special education self-contained setting according to IEP goals*
- *Teacher created videos teaching students how to solve math problems and vocabulary concepts which include directions, and/or mini-lessons and models using manipulatives (if applicable)*
- *Providing visual guides, video tutorials explaining concepts and problem-solving algorithms, and creating text-based handouts on how to solve rigorous problems*
- *ELA resource platforms provided to students: Reading A-Z, ReadWorks, Brainpop, and Khan Academy. All platforms provide Reading, Writing, Listening, with audio and/or video enhancements. All allow for individualized differentiation.*
- *Individualized differentiated ELA and Math activities using IXL, iReady, SIM TOWER and LINC*
- *Small group differentiated instruction using Google Meets...*

Related Service Instruction in the Distance Learning Environment (K-12)

- *Speech services provided through telepractice - delivered through the use of technology. Such technology includes telephone, email, internet, or videoconference.*
- *O/T, Mental Health Counseling, and Social Worker Supports provided through teletherapy - delivered through the use of technology. Such technology includes telephone, email, internet, or videoconference.¹⁷*

Just under half of the school districts (48%) included clear evidence addressing the instructional needs of Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners, including how support would be provided.

And just 26% of the school districts with the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds submitted

plans with clear evidence of strong supports for students experiencing homelessness. To meet this criterion, school district plans had to exceed the requirements of the federal McKinney-Vento Act and include reference to supports such as mental health, basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, clothing, and hygiene products), family outreach, and connections to community-based organizations. For example:

...the district will address the continuity of learning needs of homeless students/students in temporary housing by removing barriers to their participation in educational programming in following ways: All new registrants will be asked questions about device technology and internet access to determine what supports the district needs to supply for the students. Additionally, our district's McKinney-Vento Coordinator... will work with identified families to determine what device technology, internet access and related access-technology they will require. Acquisition, supply and support of these needed resources will be provided by the district for these students. Appropriate faculty members and designated liaisons will be assigned to serve as remote case managers for homeless students and other vulnerable populations. In addition to their ongoing communication with their teacher(s), weekly (at minimum) communication will be maintained with the remote case manager, to determine continued access to the online resources and support provided through the school district. In cases where mobility and transience create barriers to a continual online presence, case managers will coordinate with educators and the district's administrators for school work in print form and delivery and pick up of these materials by the district. Any additional needed supplies (paper, pencils etc.) will be provided to the students. Additionally, should other barriers be identified, case managers would serve as coordinators. For example, a senior student needing assistance with college applications or financial aid navigation would be connected to guidance personnel etc.... Teachers will work with remote case managers regarding regular contact with, and access to, these students and their work. Any concerns will be addressed in coordination with the remote case manager, teacher and building or program administrator as appropriate. Related documentation will be maintained. In cases of transience outside of the school district, the McKinney-Vento Coordinator will coordinate with other districts/agencies to ensure continuity of instruction continues and for coordination of these and other related resources. These services and resources will be aligned to and in some instances supplement the requirements of McKinney-Vento.¹⁸

26%

of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds submitted plans with clear evidence of strong supports for students experiencing homelessness.

FINDING 6: Despite a notable focus on social-emotional support, meaningful access to school counselors remained a significant unmet need

Given the essential relationship between emotional well-being and learning, NYSED's updated instructional continuity plan framework also expected school districts to describe their tools and strategies for addressing the social-emotional needs of students, families, and staff during the pandemic.

The majority of the 50 school districts in our qualitative review (58%) provided responses demonstrating clear evidence that they were proactively identifying students in need of support and leveraging community partnerships to facilitate or refer them to mental health services. For example, in one school district:

Students with significant mental health needs were linked to [a non-profit community-based organization] to receive counseling services during the closure. [The organization] is coordinating with 10 mental health organizations that service our students to ensure continuity of service.¹⁹

An additional 36% of the school districts in our qualitative review offered more passive support, with students needing to take the initiative to access social-emotional support.

Fewer school districts in our 50-plan qualitative review described how *family members* can access social-emotional support. Forty-two percent of the school districts provided clear evidence that the school district was proactively identifying families and proactively facilitating their connection to mental health services. An additional 42% of the school districts offered more passive support for family engagement, such as posting materials on their website.

School Counselors will continue to stay connected to their students and support them in any way possible. This will include but is not limited to: (1) posting Social and Emotional Learning lessons/activities into their Google Classrooms, send through Remind App or post on their school website; (2) actively seek out and be available for one-on-one, small group, and/or large group counseling sessions via videoconference (Zoom) or teleconference; (3) referring any student and/or family to Children's Health Homes by completing a... referral; and (4) contact outside agencies, such as [a health provider] or Family Services, and document contacts these counselors/social workers have had with students or families.²¹

18%

of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds demonstrated clear evidence of regular and meaningful access to school counselors.

Even though the large majority of plans described at least passive strategies for providing social-emotional support to students and families, only 18% of these 50 school districts demonstrated clear evidence of regular and meaningful access to school counselors. Strong district policies included check-ins initiated by school staff, multiple ways of interacting that do not only rely on the internet, and office hours or other consistent ways to engage school counselors.

For example, one plan included specific roles, responsibilities, and outreach strategies for school counselors at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.²⁰ In another district:

FINDING 7: School districts used multiple strategies to communicate with families, but inequities persisted—including insufficient outreach in families’ home languages

For communication between schools and families to be effective, educators must be able to provide important information quickly, respond to questions or needs, and bridge technology and language barriers.

Our quantitative analysis of all 688 school district plans revealed near-universal use of email (more than 99% of school districts), telephone and/or video calling (98%), school or district websites (98%), and video conferencing (93%) for communication. Slightly fewer school districts—85%—reported that they used social media as a communication tool.

Notably, fewer school districts—79%—reported in their instructional continuity plan that they would use a Learning Management System for communication. This is noteworthy for two reasons. First, a Learning Management System can be a particularly effective tool for communicating with parents and students because it serves as a single destination for assignments, grades, feedback, and messages, and it can generate helpful data analysis for schools. Second, district plans to use a Learning Management System for communication reflected a significant disparity: 89% of low-need school

districts planned to use this form of communication, compared to 78% of high-need school districts.

Among the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds, our qualitative review found a pattern that reflects the need for clear and consistent statewide expectations for family communication: while 78% of these school districts had plans with clear evidence of multiple communication methods that included at least one strategy that did not rely on the internet, fewer than half of the school districts (46%) clearly described how they used the multiple languages commonly spoken in the school district to notify families about plans for learning continuity, and only one school district specifically described how it partnered with community-based organizations to enhance family communication.

In the school district with a strong response to this issue, information was communicated to families directly and through more than a dozen strategies, including working with community-based organizations such as churches, local agencies, and the recreation department.²² The district’s description of its plan to provide support in families’ home languages was also robust:

Our student information system captures a [family’s] preferred language. When communication is transmitted from the district it is immediately available in English and Spanish. This includes letters, phone calls, text messages and notices on our District website.

The ENL department has been actively communicating with students and families, to support them in all academic areas. ENL teachers joined Google Classroom portals, and are able to engage with students who need or request support with their daily lessons that have been created by the classroom teachers. ENL teachers are responding to emails from students, parents/guardians/caregivers, and teachers who need assistance communicating. All of our communication is made available to the community in their preferred language using the service of our in-district translator as well as having the opportunity to use Language Line for translation services.....²³

In another school district with a clear plan for communication in multiple languages:

During the COVID 19 school closures the district took additional measures to ensure parents can ask questions, express concerns, and request support. These means include written and oral communication in English and in Spanish, and the use of Proprio translations for preferred languages. Communication and support about our Learning Continuity plan has taken place bilingually via email, phone messaging, website announcements, text messages, Remind app (with text translations), WhatsApp and social media... At all levels, parents are informed of expectations and tools for support via the media described above and by individual telephone calls and videoconferencing sessions conducted by bilingual teachers, bilingual teacher assistants, bilingual social workers, bilingual clerical staff and the school and district office administration. Parents are regularly provided phone numbers to call with questions and for support, including numbers specifically flagged for communication in Spanish, which are also posted in prominent locations on our platform. The Bilingual Education coordinator has her office telephone calls routed to her home to allow for easier communication with Spanish speaking families district wide. Other offices and schools have their voicemails checked regularly and phone calls are returned daily. In addition, all telephone and email messages from the Superintendent and from principals are translated to Spanish and sent to those whose home language is Spanish, at the same time.²⁴

46%

of the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds clearly described how they used the multiple languages commonly spoken in the school district to notify families about plans for learning continuity.

And in another school district, the instructional continuity plan described the use of TalkingPoints, a texting tool that enables communication in multiple languages:

Prior to COVID-19, [the school district] partnered with TalkingPoints as a way to support daily communication and engagement with families speaking languages other than English. We piloted the platform in four of our schools with high ENL populations, and on March 26th, TalkingPoints became an option for all schools to use. This two-way communication platform translates messages into more than 100 languages and is now being used in every school. Teachers are also able to translate instructional communication back and forth with students and their families. Directions on how to use this platform were shared with all staff.²⁵

IN CONCLUSION, the instructional continuity plans submitted by school districts are a sign of the extraordinary efforts by New York State's educators to support students and families during this difficult and unprecedented time. As shown throughout this report, they offer example after example of strong practices that others can learn from. Yet in their stark variability, they are also evidence of how disparities in practices, resources, and capacity can fuel opportunity gaps and worsen the inequities in our education system. As New York State prepares for the coming school year, these findings can help state policymakers set clear and high expectations for how each school district can prepare to equitably support all of the students they serve. ■

APPENDIX A: Analysis of School District Instructional Continuity Plan Responses

The following tables summarize how all 688 school districts responded to questions or portions of questions in the instructional continuity plan that required a multiple choice or selection response.

Responses are totaled statewide and for each school district need/resource capacity category. The New York City Department of Education is treated as a single school district (a “yes” response is marked as 100% and a “no” response is marked as 0%) and the large city school district category includes four school districts (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers).



What learning materials and content will your district utilize in your continuity of learning plan? Please select all that apply.

	Digital content and activities provided by the district, either free or subscription-based	Paper textbooks, and other content (books, magazines, etc.)	Online learning courses or course content modules	Digital copies of textbooks	Other
STATEWIDE	99%	95%	83%	80%	20%
All high-need school districts	99%	98%	87%	72%	22%
New York City	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%
Large city districts	100%	100%	100%	75%	50%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	98%	89%	84%	68%	32%
Rural high-need districts	99%	100%	88%	73%	19%
Average-need school districts	99%	95%	82%	81%	19%
Low-need school districts	99%	93%	78%	88%	20%



What communication tools will your district utilize in your continuity of learning plan? Please select all that apply.

	Email	Telephone and/or video calling	Website	Video Conferencing
STATEWIDE	>99%	98%	98%	93%
All high-need school districts	99%	99%	99%	93%
New York City	100%	100%	100%	100%
Large city districts	100%	100%	100%	100%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	98%	100%	95%	86%
Rural high-need districts	99%	99%	99%	95%
Average-need school districts	>99%	98%	98%	93%
Low-need school districts	100%	98%	98%	95%

	Social Media	Learning Management System (LMS)	Other
STATEWIDE	85%	79%	14%
All high-need school districts	90%	78%	16%
New York City	100%	100%	0%
Large city districts	100%	100%	50%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	84%	77%	20%
Rural high-need districts	91%	77%	14%
Average-need school districts	86%	76%	14%
Low-need school districts	76%	89%	12%



How is your district planning for teachers and students to interact during the school closure as a result of COVID-19? Please select all that apply.

	Asynchronous communication, feedback, and support via e-mail or LMS	Scheduled teacher/student(s) check-ins, virtual (online) and/or via phone	Teacher office hours, virtually (online) via video conferencing and/or chat, and/or phone	Other
STATEWIDE	98%	96%	95%	11%
All high-need school districts	98%	97%	94%	13%
New York City	100%	100%	100%	0%
Large city districts	100%	100%	100%	75%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	95%	98%	91%	18%
Rural high-need districts	98%	96%	94%	11%
Average-need school districts	97%	95%	95%	10%
Low-need school districts	99%	99%	96%	10%



What methods of instruction does your district plan to implement in your continuity of learning plan? Please select all that apply.

	Instructional materials provided via technology, such as posted on a teacher website or available through an LMS	Hard copy (paper) instructional materials provided to students	Individual or small group synchronous instruction facilitated using technologies such as telephone or video conferencing	Recorded instruction disseminated through technology, including via podcast, dedicated website, or Learning Management System, scheduled or on-demand television, DVD/CD
STATEWIDE	99%	95%	92%	92%
All high-need school districts	99%	99%	92%	89%
New York City	100%	100%	100%	100%
Large city districts	100%	100%	75%	100%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	98%	95%	91%	84%
Rural high-need districts	99%	100%	92%	90%
Average-need school districts	99%	96%	91%	90%
Low-need school districts	99%	87%	93%	99%

	Large-group or whole class synchronous instruction facilitated using technologies such as telephone or video conferencing	Online learning course, accessed through an LMS, self-directed and self-paced	Online learning course, accessed through an LMS, taught by a teacher	Other
STATEWIDE	79%	56%	54%	8%
All high-need school districts	80%	63%	59%	7%
New York City	100%	100%	100%	0%
Large city districts	75%	75%	75%	50%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	77%	57%	55%	14%
Rural high-need districts	80%	64%	60%	4%
Average-need school districts	75%	55%	52%	9%
Low-need school districts	87%	47%	50%	10%



Student Devices

	We provide computing devices to some students	We provide all students with a computing device	All students use personal devices	Our continuity of learning plan does not include the use of technology
STATEWIDE	67%	30%	3%	<1%
All high-need school districts	64%	32%	3%	<1%
New York City	100%	0%	0%	0%
Large city districts	75%	25%	0%	0%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	66%	25%	7%	2%
Rural high-need districts	63%	35%	3%	0%
Average-need school districts	67%	29%	3%	<1%
Low-need school districts	70%	28%	<1%	<1%



Teacher Devices

	We provide all teachers with a computing device	We provide computing devices to some teachers	All teachers use personal devices	Our continuity of learning plan does not include the use of technology
STATEWIDE	71%	25%	4%	<1%
All high-need school districts	72%	22%	4%	<1%
New York City	0%	100%	0%	0%
Large city districts	50%	50%	0%	0%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	52%	36%	9%	2%
Rural high-need districts	79%	17%	3%	<1%
Average-need school districts	71%	26%	3%	<1%
Low-need school districts	70%	25%	4%	0%



Student Home Access

	All students have high-speed internet access at home	Not all students have high-speed internet access at home
STATEWIDE	10%	90%
All high-need school districts	3%	97%
New York City	0%	100%
Large city districts	0%	100%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	9%	91%
Rural high-need districts	1%	99%
Average-need school districts	7%	93%
Low-need school districts	30%	70%



Teacher Home Access

	All teachers have high-speed internet access at home	Not all teachers have high-speed internet access at home
STATEWIDE	66%	34%
All high-need school districts	54%	46%
New York City	0%	100%
Large city districts	25%	75%
Urban/suburban high-need districts	66%	34%
Rural high-need districts	52%	48%
Average-need school districts	63%	37%
Low-need school districts	90%	10%

APPENDIX B: Detailed Review of Selected School District Plans

This policy brief draws on a qualitative analysis of all instructional continuity plans and supplementary materials submitted by the 50 school districts serving the greatest number of students from low-income backgrounds.²⁶

Selected School Districts

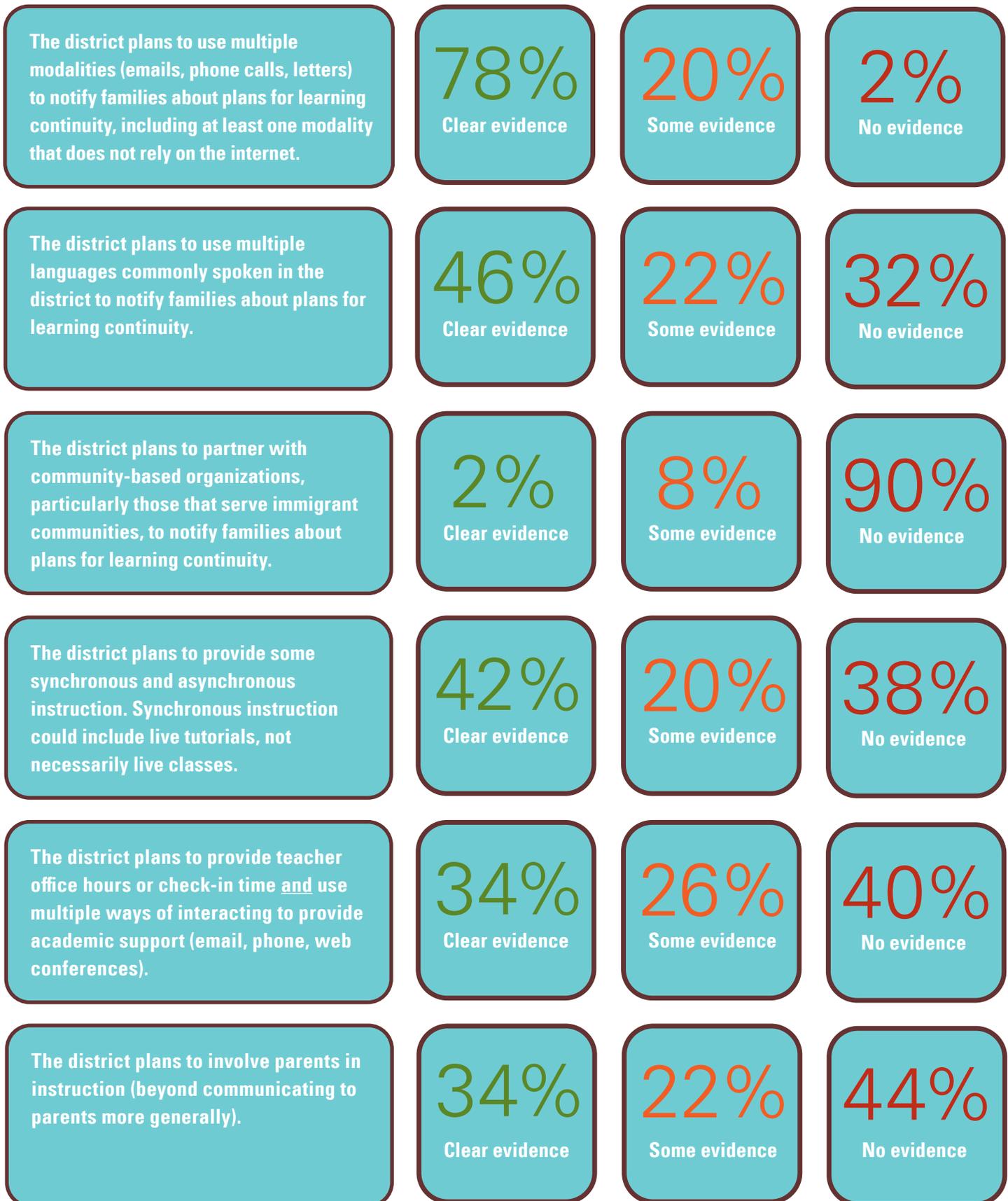
The following 50 school districts together enroll 1.4 million students, representing 56% of all students statewide, 72% of students from low-income backgrounds, 85% of Black students, 80% of Latinx students, and 86% of Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners.

COUNTY	SCHOOL DISTRICT
Albany	Albany City School District
Broome	Binghamton City School District
Chautauqua	Jamestown City School District
Chemung	Elmira City School District
Dutchess	Poughkeepsie City School District
Dutchess	Wappingers Central School District
Erie	Buffalo City School District
Erie	Kenmore-Tonawanda Union Free School District
Jefferson	Watertown City School District
Monroe	Greece Central School District
Monroe	Rochester City School District
Montgomery	Amsterdam City School District
Nassau	Freeport Union Free School District
Nassau	Hempstead Union Free School District
Nassau	Uniondale Union Free School District
Nassau	Westbury Union Free School District
New York City	New York City DOE
Niagara	Lockport City School District
Niagara	Niagara Falls City School District
Oneida	Rome City School District
Oneida	Utica City School District
Onondaga	Liverpool Central School District
Onondaga	North Syracuse Central School District
Onondaga	Syracuse City School District
Orange	Middletown City School District
Orange	Newburgh City School District
Rensselaer	Troy City School District

COUNTY	SCHOOL DISTRICT
Rockland	East Ramapo Central School District (Spring Valley)
Rockland	Haverstraw-Stony Point CSD (North Rockland)
Schenectady	Schenectady City School District
Suffolk	Bay Shore Union Free School District
Suffolk	Brentwood Union Free School District
Suffolk	Central Islip Union Free School District
Suffolk	Copiague Union Free School District
Suffolk	Huntington Union Free School District
Suffolk	Longwood Central School District
Suffolk	Middle Country Central School District
Suffolk	Patchogue-Medford Union Free School District
Suffolk	Sachem Central School District
Suffolk	South Huntington Union Free School District
Suffolk	William Floyd Union Free School District
Suffolk	Wyandanch Union Free School District
Ulster	Kingston City School District
Westchester	Mount Vernon School District
Westchester	New Rochelle City School District
Westchester	Ossining Union Free School District
Westchester	Peekskill City School District
Westchester	Port Chester-Rye Union Free School District
Westchester	White Plains City School District
Westchester	Yonkers City School District

Evaluation Criteria

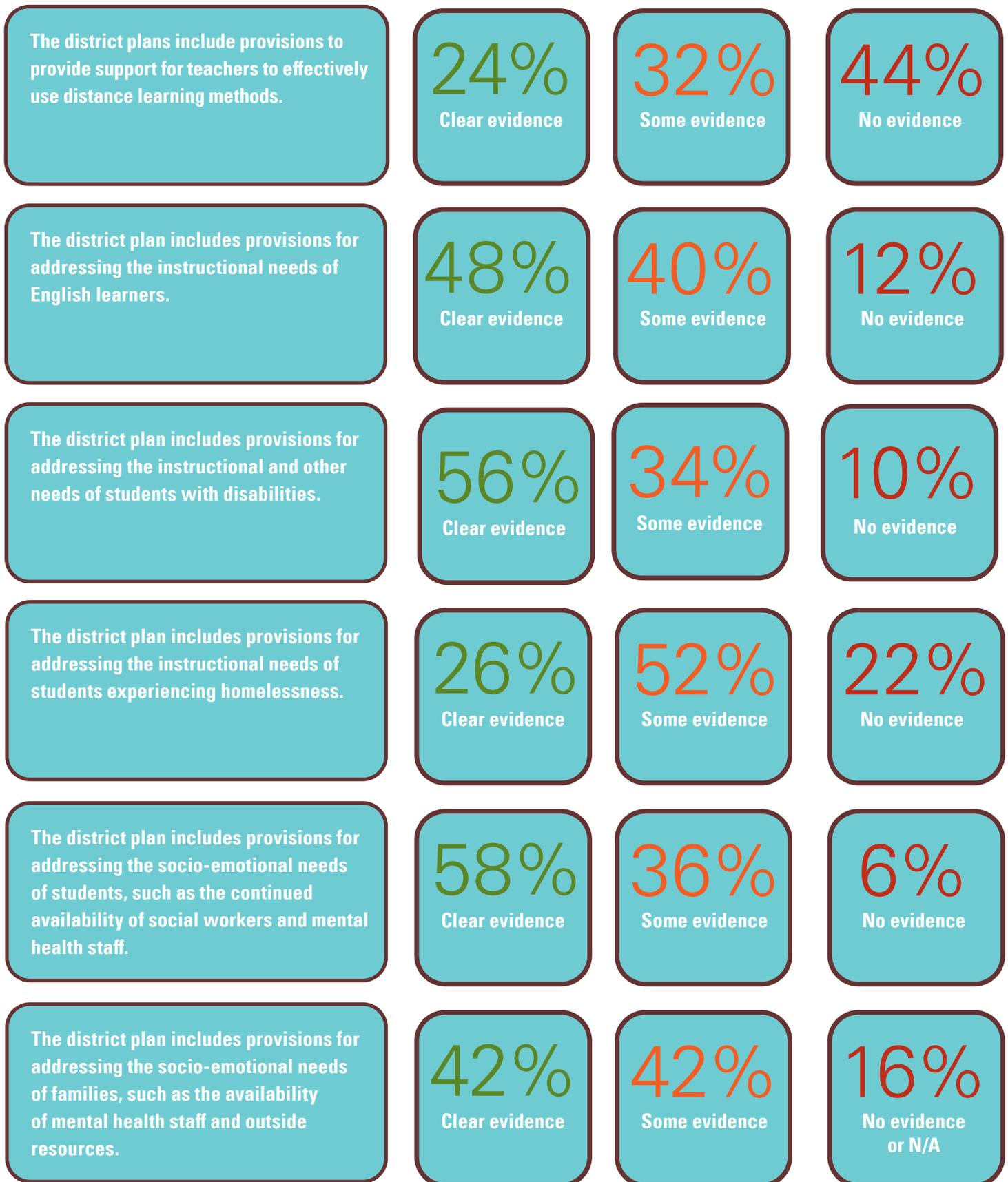
Each school district received a rating of 1 (no evidence) through 3 (clear evidence, often requiring details and specificity about implementation) across 20 criteria:



Evaluation Criteria (continued)

Expectations for student engagement in continued learning are clearly communicated.	10% Clear evidence	42% Some evidence	48% No evidence
The district plan describes how student engagement is being tracked.	74% Clear evidence	24% Some evidence	2% No evidence
There is a plan for teachers and other school staff to follow-up on students who are not participating in distance learning in order to encourage attendance.	24% Clear evidence	50% Some evidence	26% No evidence
The district plan includes meaningful alternative access to instructional materials and support for students who are not able to participate in online/distance learning.	14% Clear evidence	60% Some evidence	26% No evidence
The district plan includes alternative provisions for students to access technology devices for distance learning.	70% Clear evidence	28% Some evidence	2% No evidence
The district plan includes alternative provisions for students to the internet for distance learning.	50% Clear evidence	40% Some evidence	10% No evidence

Evaluation Criteria (continued)

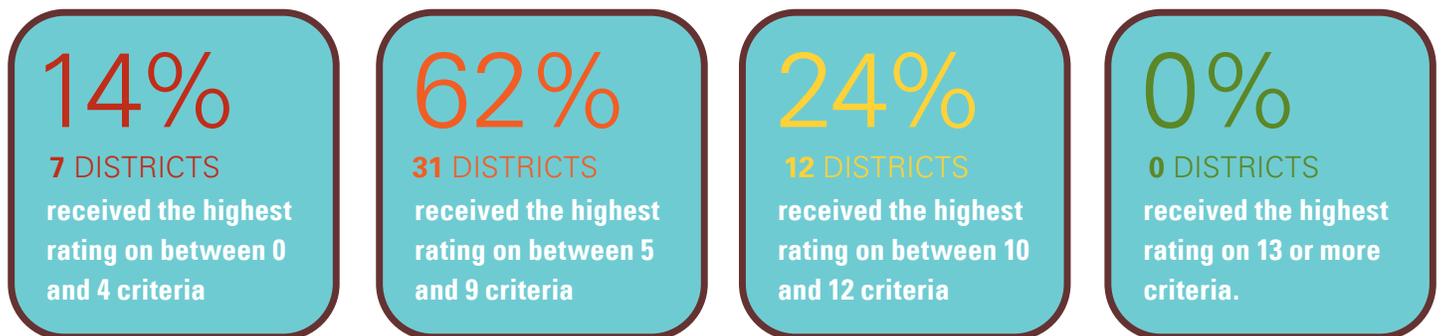


Evaluation Criteria (continued)



Overall Ratings

Based on the 20 criteria we identified, of the 50 school districts reviewed:



ENDNOTES

¹ These examples are based on the instructional continuity plans submitted by school districts to the New York State Education Department. In order to focus on broader trends, school district names are not included throughout this document.

² Emma Dorn, et al., “COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime,” (New York, NY: McKinsey & Company, 2020). Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>.

³ See: <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/no-2024-continuing-temporary-suspension-and-modification-laws-relating-disaster-emergency>.

⁴ See: <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/coronavirus/nysed-covid-19-third-guidance-3-17-20.pdf>.

⁵ See: <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/coronavirus/nysed-covid-19-third-guidance-updated-4-27-20.pdf>.

⁶ Number of students from low-income backgrounds is based on “economically disadvantaged” student enrollment from New York State Education Department, “Preliminary District Level Data by Grade 2019-20,” available at <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/home.html>.

⁷ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED. Quotes in this report are taken directly from the instructional continuity plans submitted by school districts and are not edited for style.

⁸ School district document submitted to NYSED.

⁹ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹⁰ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹¹ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹² *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹³ Survey conducted on behalf of The Education Trust—New York by Global Strategy Group. See www.edtrustny.org/coronavirus for additional poll details.

¹⁴ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹⁵ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹⁶ School district document submitted to NYSED.

¹⁷ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹⁸ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

¹⁹ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

²⁰ School district document submitted to NYSED.

²¹ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

²² *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

²³ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

²⁴ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

²⁵ *Continuity of Instruction Plan* submitted to NYSED.

²⁶ See endnote 6.



The Education Trust—New York

315 West 36th Street, Floor 2, New York, NY 10018
P 646-844-0228 | F 518-252-4154 | WWW.EDTRUSTNY.ORG