RESEARCH BRIEF

Teacher Interactions With Students and Families During COVID-19

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In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across the country to close their buildings, leading to sudden shifts in how educators provide instruction, leadership, and support to their students and families.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a nationally representative survey to better understand how school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) responded to the pandemic. The National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19 was sent to leaders in 2,500 school districts and 260 CMOs in late May 2020.[1] Results from the survey appear in the First Look Brief released in July 2020 and the following briefs released in October 2020: Spotlight on English Learners, Spotlight on Students With Disabilities, and How District Approaches to Remote Instruction Differed Across Contexts.

In this brief, we examine the expected frequency of teacher–student and teacher–family interactions during the spring 2020 school closures. Our hope is that these results inform future practices of administrators, policymakers, and researchers.

About This Brief

- This brief presents survey results on the expected frequency of teacher–student and teacher–family interactions during the spring 2020 school closures.

- These results are based on responses from 753 school districts.

- We focus on district leader responses regarding the frequency with which teachers were expected to: [2]

  – Meet with their students

  – Be available at scheduled times to respond to student questions

  – Communicate with families about expectations for students or distance learning resources

- The findings highlight discrepancies in the expected frequency of teacher–student interactions by district poverty level and urbanicity.[3]

Teacher Interactions With Students and Families

In typical classroom settings, meaningful interactions that build relationships between teachers and their students are central to students' academic outcomes (Liberante, 2012; Quin, 2017). Interacting with students in person allows teachers to gauge motivation, engagement, and content understanding—facets of learning that are more difficult to determine from a distance (Zweig & Stafford, 2016). Due to the pandemic, however, teachers across the country have been tasked with transitioning from classroom instruction to remote or hybrid models, a shift that has reduced—if not entirely eradicated—their opportunities for in-person interactions with their students.

While the transition to remote instruction challenged teacher–student relationships nationwide, evidence suggests that teachers and students in high-poverty and rural areas were particularly affected by this shift. For example, Malkus (2020) found that high-poverty districts were less likely than low-poverty districts to expect one-on-one teacher–student contact in spring 2020. Similarly, Gross and Opalka (2020) reported that rural districts were less likely than urban districts to expect regular teacher–student check-ins in spring 2020. These disparities in teacher–student interactions may further the anticipated learning loss already attributed to the widespread reductions in instructional time that have occurred as a result of the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020).

Teacher communication with families also shifted in response to the pandemic, and this was a particular area of concern for teachers due to variation in household environments and their capacity to support distance learning (Stelitano et al., 2020). In high-poverty and rural areas, where access to technology was more limited, teachers reported more difficulty reaching families (Stelitano et al., 2020). Hamilton et al. (2020) found that teachers in rural areas often faced their own technological limitations, in addition to those of the families they served.

To further understand how teacher interactions with students and families were affected by the pandemic, we examine information collected directly from district leaders on the expected frequency of teacher–student and teacher–family interactions while schools were closed in spring 2020. Specifically, we report the frequency with which teachers were expected to "meet with their students," "be available at scheduled times to respond to student questions," and "communicate with families about expectations for students or distance learning resources." We explore these results by district poverty level and urbanicity in an effort to identify any discrepancies in district expectations for teacher–student and teacher–family interactions during the spring 2020 school closures.

Meeting With Students

Most districts (87%) indicated that teachers were expected to "meet with their students" at least weekly while schools were closed in spring 2020, while 31% expected teachers to have daily meetings with their students. Low-poverty districts were significantly more likely to expect daily teacher–student meetings (40%) than high-poverty districts (28%). Additionally, urban districts were significantly more likely to expect daily teacher–student meetings (35%) than rural districts (28%; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of districts expecting teachers to meet with students daily

By district poverty level   By urbanicity

Low   40%   Urban   35%

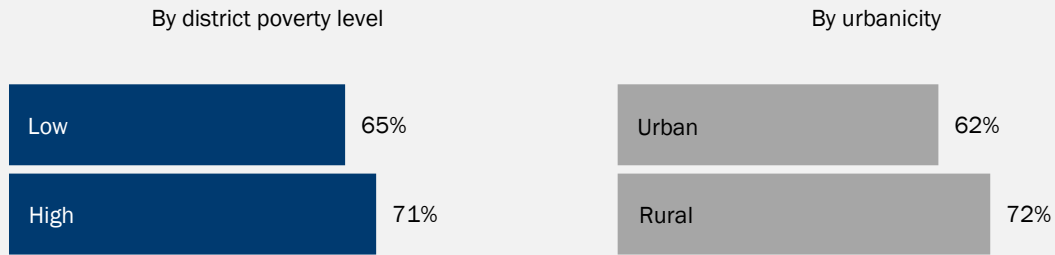High   28%   Rural   28%

Sample sizes. 120 low-poverty districts, 178 high-poverty districts, 317 urban districts, and 178 rural districts.

Note. Differences by district poverty level and urbanicity were statistically significant. Findings are based on survey results from spring of 2020.

Being Available at Scheduled Times

Almost all districts (97%) reported that teachers were expected to "be available at scheduled times to respond to student questions" on at least a weekly basis while schools were closed in spring 2020. Most districts (67%) reported that teachers were expected to be available at scheduled times each day. This expectation did not significantly differ for high-poverty versus low-poverty districts (71% and 65%, respectively), but it did differ by urbanicity. In contrast to the results for meeting with students reported above, more rural districts expected daily teacher availability (72%) than urban districts (62%; see Figure 2). This may be tied to the limited technological access in rural areas (Hamilton et al., 2020), as offering availability at scheduled times each day allows greater flexibility for the student than would be the case for daily teacher–student meetings. For example, if a student shares a computer with a sibling, and the sibling has synchronous classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, then the student could choose to attend their teacher's office hours on Mondays and Wednesdays to avoid overlap with their sibling's schedule.

Figure 2. Percentage of districts expecting teachers to be available at scheduled times daily

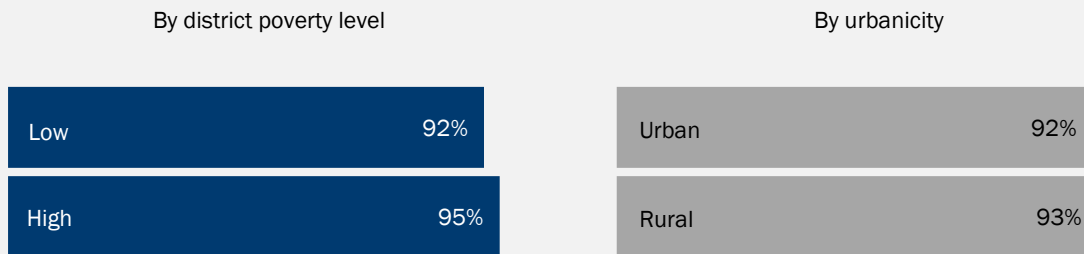| By district poverty level		By urbanicity	
Low	65%	Urban	62%
High	71%	Rural	72%

Sample sizes. 126 low-poverty districts, 187 high-poverty districts, 331 urban districts, and 184 rural districts.

Note. Differences by district poverty level were not statistically significant. Differences by urbanicity were statistically significant. Findings are based on survey results from spring of 2020.

Communicating With Families

Nearly all districts (93%) indicated that teachers were expected to "communicate with families about expectations for students or distance learning resources" at least weekly in spring 2020. While expectations for meeting with students and being available at scheduled times differed by district characteristics, regular communication with families was an expectation upheld by nearly all districts, regardless of poverty level or urbanicity (see Figure 3). However, previous studies have shown that teachers in high-poverty and rural areas report more difficulty reaching families due to limited technological access (Hamilton et al., 2020; Stelitano et al., 2020). Thus, while our survey results cannot directly speak to whether teachers actually met the expectations of their districts, it is possible that fulfilling the expectation for weekly family outreach placed a larger burden on teachers in high-poverty and rural areas, as establishing and maintaining teacher–family communication during distance learning may require more time and coordination in contexts where access to technology is limited.

Figure 3. Percentage of districts expecting teachers to communicate with families at least weekly

By district poverty level		By urbanicity	
Low	92%	Urban	92%
High	95%	Rural	93%

Sample sizes. 121 low-poverty districts, 181 high-poverty districts, 319 urban districts, and 182 rural districts.

Note. Differences by district poverty level and urbanicity were not statistically significant. Findings are based on survey results from spring of 2020.

Conclusion

The spring 2020 school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic challenged teacher–student relationships nationwide, as opportunities for in-person teacher–student interactions were greatly reduced—if not entirely eradicated—by the transition to remote instruction. During this time, district expectations for the frequency of teacher–student interactions differed across contexts, with high-poverty and rural districts being less likely to expect daily teacher–student meetings than their low-poverty and urban counterparts. District expectations for teacher–family communication were more consistent across contexts. However, while our survey results cannot directly speak to whether teachers actually met the expectations of their districts, it is possible that fulfilling the expectation for weekly family outreach placed a larger burden on teachers in high-poverty and rural districts due to limited technological access in those areas (Hamilton et al., 2020; Stelitano et al., 2020).

Sources such as Liberante (2012) and Quin (2017) support the notion that meaningful teacher–student interactions are central to students' academic outcomes, and Zweig and Stafford (2016) highlight the difficulties of building these meaningful relationships without opportunities for in-person interactions. While district responses to COVID-19 have likely evolved since the spring of 2020, the pandemic persists, and thus the challenges of building meaningful relationships in distance learning environments persist as well. As school districts across the country continue to navigate distance learning in response to COVID-19, and as they transition back to more traditional schooling models, districts will likely need to identify strategies for teachers to build and maintain relationships with their students and families without placing an unmanageable burden on teachers—particularly those in high-poverty and rural areas.

References

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Endnotes

[1] AIR funded and led the development of the survey, which was administered by our partner NORC at the University of Chicago. We sent the survey to school districts in every U.S. state and Washington, D.C., as well as to CMOs across the country. The sample contained 2,536 districts, stratified by state (for districts in 12 focal states) or region (for districts in the remaining states) and locale (urban, suburban, town, and rural). Within these strata, districts were drawn with probability proportional to the square root of enrollment. Large districts were drawn with certainty. The survey was open between May 20 and September 1, and 753 public school districts and 91 CMOs responded during that time. The results reported in this brief use design weights adjusted for nonresponse in the 64 state- or region-by-locale strata. More information about the survey methodology is available in a technical supplement.

[2] Survey respondents were asked to select a frequency for each expectation using the following response options: (a) On a daily basis; (b) At least weekly but not daily; (c) Less than weekly; (d) Never, not expected of teachers; or (e) Left up to the schools or teachers. For the purposes of this brief, "Left up to the schools or teachers" was coded as "Not applicable." We analyzed meeting with students and being available at scheduled times as daily expectations, as we would expect these to be daily occurrences during a typical school year. We analyzed communicating with families as an "at least weekly" expectation, as we would expect this to occur at least weekly during a typical school year.

[3] We used U.S. Census data and the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data to determine district characteristics. We defined low-poverty districts as those with less than 10% of school-age children living in poverty, and high-poverty districts as those with at least 20% of school-age children living in poverty. We defined rural and urban based on locale classifications provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (Geverdt, 2015), where rural districts are located within a Census-defined rural territory and nonrural districts are located within a Census-defined urbanized area or cluster (encompassing cities, suburbs, and towns).

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