

Distance Learning and Online Coordination of Service in Pennsylvania's Rural School Districts

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The COVID-19 pandemic was an exceptionally disruptive event that imposed a serious strain on the ability of Pennsylvania's rural schools to provide distance learning and deliver essential noneducational services to their students and communities during extended school closures. Rural schools function not only as educational institutions, but also as local hubs of civic activity and are central to their communities' local identities. They also have a long history of special challenges. When rural school buildings had to close their doors and in-person instruction suddenly shifted to remote learning beginning in March 2020, the ability of these schools to provide distance learning adequately and equitably, and to deliver essential services to their communities, was severely tested.

The purpose of this research was to understand the specific problems that rural school districts encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, learn how these districts responded to their unique challenges, and identify the policies, practices, and resources that are needed for Pennsylvania's rural schools to be better prepared for the next emergency that may close schools for an extended period.

The research included an examination of school district websites and planning documents, a survey of rural school district superintendents, focus group interviews with superintendents and Intermediate Unit executive directors, and a Delphi study of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school board members, and administrators.

Key Findings

- *Rural schools had inadequate internet access.* Fifty-eight percent of rural superintendent survey respondents reported that internet access had the greatest impact on their ability to deliver distance education. More than 80 percent of districts had to provide hotspots to students, and nearly 76 percent had to provide teachers with hotspots or devices to teach online.
- *Rural schools had insufficient 1:1 initiatives.* 1:1 initiatives provide each student in a given grade or school with a personal device (laptop, tablet, etc.). Roughly one third of rural districts initiated or expanded their 1:1 initiatives as a result of the pandemic.
- *Professional development requires increased support.* Every rural school in this study reported providing professional development for online instruction, but over three-quarters reported problems including time constraints (66 percent), collective bargaining agreements (29 percent), and internet access problems (20 percent).
- *The pandemic increased the demand for mental health services.* The respondents noted surging levels of stress during the pandemic, which strained the ability of schools to provide mental health services to students and teachers. Districts leaders struggled to hire mental health professionals, social workers, and counselors because of the lack of a candidate pool for these positions in rural areas.
- *Rural schools face staff and teacher shortages.* Prior to the pandemic, rural school districts had staff, faculty, and substitute teacher shortages because of location and competition with businesses and other workplaces

that can provide higher wages to job candidates. During the pandemic, these shortages were exacerbated.

- *Cyber charter schools affect rural school district enrollments.* In the focus group interviews, respondents expressed concern about competition from cyber charter schools, which may drain off enrollments.
- *Shifting state and federal guidelines caused real challenges.* Rural school officials were required to administer shifting policies and guidelines that were passed onto them. They faced the anger of their communities over these changing rules and mandates although they had no control over them. Initial community support for schools eroded over the course of the pandemic.

Policy Considerations

The research found broad support from a variety of stakeholders for the following policy considerations:

- Increase funding for municipalities or counties to provide access to high-speed broadband internet.
- Provide tax incentives to companies that bring broadband access to rural areas.
- Create or expand funding programs for 1:1 computing initiatives in rural schools.
- Provide statewide professional development in online course design, teaching strategies, and technologies.
- Support and fund more rural school and community mental health services.
- Increase state-level monitoring of cyber charter schools to ensure they adhere to Pennsylvania Department of Education guidelines for quality of instruction.
- Change the Pennsylvania School Code to remove the 180-day requirement or the hourly requirement for students, and to prioritize education based on competency to align with effective practices in distance learning.

Scan the QR code for the report, *Distance Learning and Online Coordination of Service in Pennsylvania's Rural School Districts.*



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