

Inequity in Pennsylvania School District Reopening Decisions: How Districts' Mode of Delivery Varies by Region and Student/Community Characteristics

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As summer wanes, educators and community leaders face tough challenges in determining how to open public schools across the Commonwealth and nation due to the unabated nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has unevenly affected communities for reasons related to structural racism and inequality. Scholars and educators have cited equity-based reasons for and against reopening schools for in-person instruction.¹ Public education, strongly influenced by the tradition of local control, is not immune to the ways in which structural disparities affect the educational opportunity of young people in our country² but the COVID-19 crisis is making this more visible as districts struggle to balance competing demands with varying resources and constraints. In Pennsylvania, the school financing system is the subject of on-going litigation because of the vast disparities across district boundary lines, fueled by high reliance on local tax revenue for schools. This inequality is more likely to affect districts with higher percentages of students of color. The district reopening decisions are consequential because of the many needs beyond education alone that public schools serve such as providing access to food, or physical and mental health screenings. Additionally, experiences in the spring and existing research about online learning in K-12 raises concerns about how remote learning may not provide the same opportunities, especially for certain subgroups of children; these concerns should be taken into account while also balancing the health considerations of the pandemic for children, staff and their families. Though choosing to be remote is often a choice that districts make due to local community spread of COVID and responsive to the uneven ways in which COVID has affected communities of color, conversely, remote learning may be especially hard for younger children and/or children of essential workers who are disproportionately Black and Latinx.³

In order to reopen, Pennsylvania required each of its 500 school districts to submit their own Health and Safety plans for the 2020-2021 academic year. Every plan outlines the specific protocols each school district will follow when COVID-19's transmission levels are manageable, when they are increasing, and when the risk of transmission is too high for students to gather in-person. Statewide, districts are referring to these classifications as “green,” “yellow,” and “red” phases. We surveyed all 500 districts' Health and Safety plans in an effort to understand trends in reopening decisions across the state.⁴ Special attention was paid to the differing school options

¹ NEPC. (2020, August). *To reopen or not to reopen: Equity-related arguments for and against resuming in-person instruction this fall*. https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Newsletter%20reopen_0.pdf

² See Edbuild. (2019, February). *\$23 Billion*. Edbuild. <https://edbuild.org/content/23-billion>.

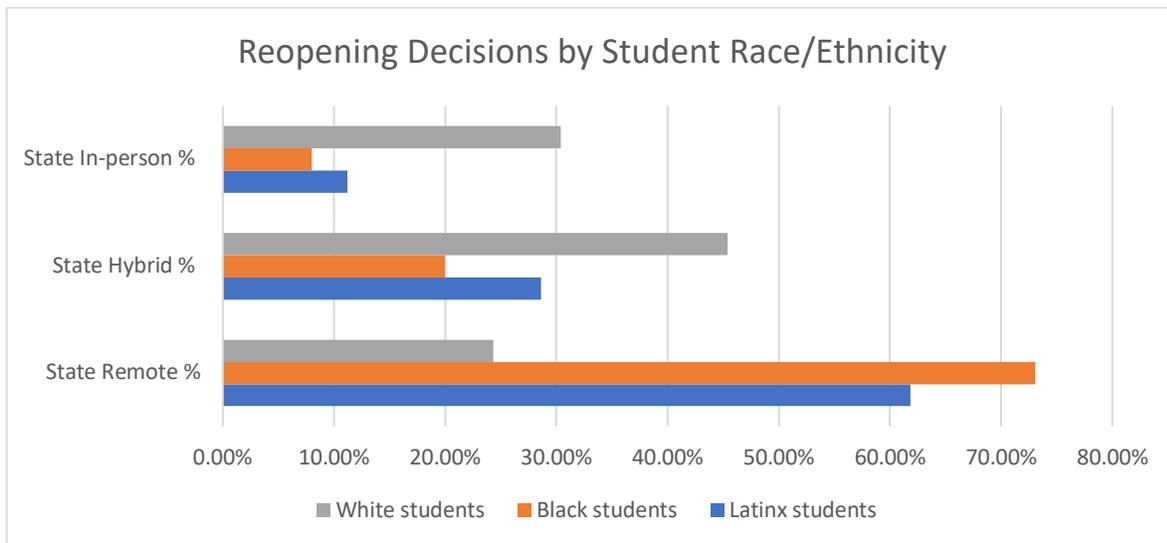
³ Gould, E., & Wilson, V. (2020, June 1). *Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus – racism and economic inequality*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>. See also Miller, C. C. (2020, August 19). *'I'm Only One Human Being': Parents Brace for a Go-It-Alone School Year*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/upshot/coronavirus-home-school-parents.html?action=click>.

⁴ We were unable to include charter schools in this analysis but we welcome submission of plans.

in these plans for districts based on the racial composition of student enrollment alongside community characteristics such as internet access, community size, and community wealth. The results revealed a staggering disparity between student race and reopening decisions.

While districts are making a multitude of decisions about instruction, such as delaying the start of the school year to better understand the risks of various scenarios, we focused on decisions to date about how instruction and learning will occur. Across the state, 37% of students are enrolled in districts that will start remotely, and another 40% with hybrid instruction. A noticeably lower percentage (24%) of students are in districts returning in-person. The modes of instruction vary widely across the state’s regions. The majority of districts in the southeast region that includes Philadelphia and its suburban areas will open remotely, for instance but, as of now, no central or north central districts have made a remote-only decision.

The majority of Pennsylvania’s White students have the option of attending school in-person either full-time or through a hybrid model, while the majority of Black and Hispanic students live in remote-only districts. The racial disparity between these decisions is especially pronounced. Twenty-four percent of the state’s White students live in districts that will reopen with all-virtual instruction, but 72% of the state’s Black students and 61% of the state’s Hispanic students will not have the option of any in-person instruction as schools reopen.⁵ Of the over 1.5 million students in these data, 67% are White students but just 44% of students in remote-only districts are White. Black and Hispanic students make up the next largest racial groups, each 12% of total student enrollment but are 19% and 24%, respectively, of remote-only enrollment.



⁵ Likely due to the way in which COVID-19 has more harshly affected communities of color, including Black and Latinx children compared to White children, polling finds that Black and Latinx parents are more likely to be concerned about in person school and yet also worry about their children being disadvantaged by remote learning. Meckler, L., & Guskin E. (2020, August 6). *Fearing coronavirus and missed classes, many parents prefer mixing online and in-person school, poll finds.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/post-poll-schools-parents-covid-trump/2020/08/05/f04ae490-d722-11ea-9c3b-dfc394c03988_story.html. See also Somos/UnidosUS National Survey of Latinos. Latino Decisions. (2020, August 17). <https://latinodecisions.com/polls-and-research/somos-unidosus-national-survey-of-latinos/>

Similar to national trends in which most of the largest districts are beginning school remotely, in Pennsylvania, remote-only districts are in much larger communities on average.⁶ Yet they face the same struggles with access to broadband internet that the average district in Pennsylvania faces. Students’ inability to access the internet is a statewide concern, especially as districts fully expect to move between in-person, hybrid, and remote instruction depending on local transmission rates. On average, only 74% to 86% of residents across the state have access to broadband internet. The southeast region of the state has the highest rates of internet connectivity, which may help to explain their districts’ decisions to reopen with hybrid and remote instruction. A staggering 20% of students, on average, in remote-only districts currently do not have access to high-speed internet.

Reopening Decisions by Community Size & Internet Availability		
Mode of Delivery	Average Community Size	Average Internet Access
In-person	16,453	77%
Hybrid	23,143	79%
Remote	49,270	79%

Districts have been faced with nearly impossible and continually changing circumstances such as knowledge about COVID itself and changing community incidence as they have planned for the 2020-21 academic year. Even as districts carefully balance health considerations and student learning, their decisions have significant and differential effects on families because of existing inequality. As it currently stands in Pennsylvania, over one-third of all students live in a remote-only district, and this number may further increase (e.g., in the time in which we were monitoring districts’ plans to prepare this brief, the number increased); another 40% of students live in a hybrid district. Black and Latinx students are disproportionately more likely to be in districts that are remote-only, which has implications for how to support these families and students. For specific district information, [see accompanying spreadsheet](#).

There are many details about reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic that are beyond the scope of our brief analysis but are essential in terms of the experiences that students have, and the health and well-being of the adults working in schools. Our focus on the mode of public education, at least at the start, helps us to understand the ways in which districts are differentially responding given public health concerns and resource considerations. Regardless of their mode of instruction, schools in fall 2020 will look vastly different. Students will encounter new protocols marked by social distancing; parents will likely have little physical access to schools; and teachers will need both technical and emotional support in addition to on-going professional development to navigate the complex role they are in. Some districts’ Health and Safety plans noted adjusting the time of instruction to offer teachers time to plan and support remote learners; because the plans were focused on health, however, there were few details outlining structures to support teachers’ work. Additionally, at a time of increased health and economic needs, public schools require *more* resources instead of the tight fiscal circumstances many are in. The federal government has an important role to play here as its assistance would ensure that the inequality

⁶ An *Education Week* analysis found that as of August 18, 2020, 20 of the 25 districts with largest enrollment were remote-only. See *School Districts’ Reopening Plans: A Snapshot*. Education Week. (2020, August 19). <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/school-districts-reopening-plans-a-snapshot.html>

between communities does not widen the gap in the type of support and education public school districts are able to offer, and ultimately the educational opportunities available to students merely because of where they live.

We conclude with recommendations specific to ensuring equity in public education, although, of course, the most important ways to address the challenges of this moment are for coordinated public health efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to develop and disseminate an effective vaccine.⁷ Given the current federal reluctance to proactively support school districts regardless of their reopening plans, we make the following recommendations:

- Increased state support for school districts. Foundations and corporations could also invest in public education, especially philanthropies based in Pennsylvania;
- Address internet connectivity, which as we've shown is lacking in many districts that are remote-only. Districts have tried some methods to increase connectivity, like distributing hot spots, but much more is needed. Companies like Comcast or others can provide free access and work with the state to develop infrastructure to ensure that this is available to all families;
- Child care is a major concern for families in districts that are remote-only and hybrid, and to a lesser extent for districts with in-person options as plans may be fluid throughout the year. Younger students and certain groups of students that have special learning needs need support and supervision from families. This may disproportionately harm Black and Latinx students whose families are more likely to be deemed essential, in-person workers. Some districts have considered learning hubs to support students who need in-person assistance as a means of equitably meeting the needs of students that face unique challenges now. Community organizations can also partner with districts, and must ensure that such opportunities are available to all, without cost being a barrier;
- Temporary waivers from testing and accountability requirements and a switch to pass-fail grading would reduce the pressure on educators, students, and families. This needs coordination between K-12 and higher education so as to not penalize students;
- Hold districts harmless on funding tied to student enrollment counts and attendance for the 2020-21 school year.

Navigating the 2020-2021 school year is an immensely challenging process. Earlier this year, there was renewed recognition both of the many ways public schools serve their varied and inequitably resourced communities *and* the ways in which structural racism persist in very unequal opportunities particularly for Black families and communities. These statewide trends on reopening continue to reinforce that understanding. It is our hope, as we bring attention to these differences in Pennsylvania and continue to monitor these trends, that with the collaboration of public institutions, businesses, and community groups, the response to this pandemic that has unevenly affected communities can begin to reduce inequality as a start to a broader re-envisioning of public education.

⁷ For additional suggestions, see https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UcUOcbSqZIKFv8fi6chU4RuKiUcjz_-O/view

Methodological Notes

This spreadsheet is updated to reflect district reopening decisions as of August 17, 2020, although school boards continue to modify their plans. If your district's reopening plan is mischaracterized on this spreadsheet, please email psu.cecr@gmail.com. Our team intends to provide updated snapshots throughout the year, at quarterly or semesterly breaks.

Regional classifications for this spreadsheet were taken from the Pennsylvania Department of Education's school district map.⁸ Racial demographic information and student enrollment for each district pertains to the 2018-2019 academic year. This data is available through the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data.⁹ Data from NCES also describes each community's access to broadband internet, median income, total population.

Reopening decisions were primarily determined by looking at districts' mandated Health and Safety Plans for the 2020-2021 school year. Amid other changes, many districts have delayed the start of the school year until Sept. 8. In an effort to clarify districts' reopening plans, the research team also referenced school board minutes, website announcements, and Facebook updates.

For the purposes of this spreadsheet, "in-person" decisions mean that all students at every grade level have the option of receiving daily face-to-face instruction with enhanced safety measures in place. Although a district may be classified as "in-person," it does not mean that students are required to attend school in-person; should they need or wish, students have the choice of attending in a hybrid and/or remote manner. Some school districts are adopting a hybrid schedule for the first two days to help students and teachers acclimate to new safety protocols. If these districts transition to an in-person instructional model after their first few days, we identified them as in-person districts. A few districts made arrangements for students to attend school as normal four days a week and engage in virtual learning on Wednesdays or Fridays. The school district and Pennsylvania classified this arrangement as "in-person," which we adopted.

Districts that are classified as "hybrid" are reopening with some form of scaffolded or blended learning. There are many varieties of hybrid learning. Common arrangements include elementary students attending school in-person while secondary students attend virtually. Many districts are utilizing A/B schedules, with students (especially at the secondary level) divided into two groups by their last names. Groups either split the week in half (with one day typically reserved for all-virtual instruction and a deep clean of the school) or alternate full weeks of instruction.

Last, districts that are classified as "remote" have decided that all instruction at all grade levels will happen online, at least for the first several weeks of the school year. Many remote districts have indicated that they will reassess the risk of transmission roughly every three weeks and will relax restrictions as soon as it's safe to do so.

⁸ *Education Directory and Maps*. Pennsylvania Department of Education.
<https://www.education.pa.gov/Pages/Education-Directory-and-Maps.aspx>

⁹ National Center for Education Statistics. *2018-19 School District Enrollments by Race/Ethnicity*. Elementary and Secondary Information System.
<https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/expresstables.aspx?bridge=quickFacts&tableid=30&level=District&focusValue=PA&year=2018-19>