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Knowledge BRIEF

Voices From the Field: County Office of Education Leaders Discuss COVID-19's Impact on California Education

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This knowledge brief is part of a continuing series designed to inform California education leaders about new research findings on key state policy topics. It summarizes themes emerging from interviews conducted in June 2020 with California County Offices of Education leaders about pandemic-related issues and includes findings on that topic from national surveys of teachers and school leaders.

Background

For many California school district and County Office of Education (COE) staff, the COVID-19 pandemic makes the start of the 2020–2021 school year completely different than in any prior year. In response to the pandemic, by April 27, 2020, all California K–12 school campuses had closed.[1] Everyone, including COE staff, had to adjust to a new way of working when school buildings were shuttered and teachers and students had to transition to distance learning. In June, when interviews for this brief were being conducted, California schools and districts were preparing for the fall by developing individualized reopening plans that would be based on a variety of factors, such as what districts had heard from their families through community engagement, guidelines that were then in development from the California Department of Education

(CDE), and the numbers and rates of people testing positive for COVID-19 in their communities.[2]

Introduction

To better understand the reopening planning process and other issues related to education during the pandemic, WestEd conducted telephone interviews with COE leaders from five different counties about how school closures due to COVID-19 impacted their work with districts and schools. All five interviewees had participated in WestEd's Measure to Improve Network (MIN) during 2018 and 2019.[3] These interviews were conducted in early June, before the July 17 mandate from the Governor's Office that schools cannot reopen in person.[4]

The five COE leaders who were interviewed for this brief represent different corners of the state: Tehama, Tulare, Orange, Napa, and Placer counties.[5] These counties range in size, with Tehama and Napa having among the smallest enrollments in California, while Orange has the third largest enrollment. The counties also vary demographically: For example, only 21 percent of Placer's enrollment is Hispanic or Latino, a mirror image of Tulare's 78 percent.[6] Across these counties,

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1 EdSource, 2020

2 California Department of Education, 2020a

3 https://thecenter.wested.org/our-work/mli/min-network/

4 The Sacramento Bee, 2020

5 For ease of reference, this brief refers to each interviewee by the name of that leader's county (e.g., Tehama COE), although these professionals shared their perspectives as individuals and do not necessarily speak for their entire agency.

6 California Department of Education, 2020b

common themes emerged throughout the interviews around how COVID-19 has impacted COE work with schools and districts. Most notably, the school closures have changed how COEs and local educational agencies (LEAs) *collaborate and communicate* with each other, with their students and their families, and with service providers. Additionally, although school staff endeavor to make learning conditions more equitable for students, distance learning brought *equity issues* to the forefront, including students' access to internet connectivity, technology devices, and supports for specific student populations.

To place these findings from California in a national context, the authors of this brief also analyzed data from RAND's 2020 American Educator Panels, the American School Leader Panel (ASLP)[7] and the American Teacher Panel (ATP)[8] surveys.[9] These surveys, conducted in May 2020, included a special section related to the pandemic. Although responses from California teachers cannot yet be isolated in these data, the ASLP and ATP results are among the first large-scale survey data releases to include responses to COVID-related questions, providing a glimpse into how school leaders and teachers in the United States are viewing the issues that WestEd researchers discussed with COE leaders.

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7 RAND American Educator Panels, American School Leader Panel, 2020

8 RAND American Educator Panels, American Teacher Panel, 2020

9 The ATP surveys were originally launched in 2014 and are administered several times per year in all U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Membership on the ATP remains representative over time, as educators who change schools remain on the panel and new members are added periodically. For the spring 2020 AIRS administration discussed here, 1,000 teachers and 957 school leaders across the country responded to their respective surveys. Not all respondents responded to every item, so the per-item sample varied. The responses reported in this brief have been weighted so that they are nationally representative. Therefore, this brief reports on teachers and school leaders from across the country or nationwide.

Collaboration and Communication During COVID-19

During the pandemic, a state-mandated shelter-in-place order made working from home the new normal for LEA staff. The same communication challenges that had existed before the pandemic became more evident. LEAs had to become more intentional about disseminating information to administrators, educators, parents, and students, taking into account inequities in access to the internet and communications technologies. At the same time, new opportunities emerged in terms of professional collaboration and communicating with particular groups of families. In general, COE leaders had more positive responses related to communication than did teachers and school leaders across the United States, but not in all cases.

Professional Collaboration. The COE interviewees reported increased communication and improved collaboration to share information among staff within the same office, across COEs, and with school district staff. COE leaders also reported some increased collaboration with school leaders and teachers. As mentioned by Tehama COE, before the school closures and shelter-in-place orders, COE staff had been able to simply walk down the office hall and discuss work with a colleague, but since the pandemic hit, calls needed to be scheduled to share information. Furthermore, the same challenge had extended to each school district, school, and so on. COE leaders reported that this intentionality around communication has generated some positive results. One COE leader described how staff had been accomplishing more and making more connections as a result:

"One of the things that we're doing with our teams is a lot of Zoom team meetings and they really appreciate that because [teachers] missed that adult interaction with a team. . . . That's really important for our staff even though they're in different departments and doing different stuff. To come together and to be able to talk and debrief, we're probably

doing that more often than we did when we were in the office. I think that's really positive."

— *Tehama COE*

In some cases, COE leaders reported that they were meeting more now with district and school staff than they had been before the pandemic, when based in their offices. This increased intentionality about communication and information dissemination was mentioned by all five interviewees. As one described:

"Communication [among] county offices has greatly increased with the virtual meetings, which has been really exciting. I think I'm more well-informed now than I ever have been. It seems like it works much better to communicate across counties than to come together. . . . [Without travel constraints] we're able to 'gather' more often."

— *Orange County Department of Education, OCDE*

Most of the five COE leaders described a need to find even more ways for school districts to connect with one another, especially for communicating about school reopening plans and assessments. Some COE staff were working to bring school district superintendents together to work on reopening plans and to share what they were learning. One COE leader reported that the county superintendent was having weekly communication with district superintendents and regularly holding teacher meetings to think through what online instruction would look like for teachers:

"The superintendents regularly get together and our curriculum and instruction division is holding regular town halls or meetings where teachers can congregate and think though what instruction looks like."

— *Tulare COE*

And one COE described new collaboration around professional learning:

"When [COVID-19] first started, it was [about] how do we [COE] support districts who are supporting distance learning. How do we turn it [professional development] around in a quick and timely fashion? And what support do they need from us as the county office to do that? We did some professional learning, we put together some professional learning for staff right away for some of our smaller districts on how to transition to a distance learning platform."

— *Napa COE*

The circumstances during the pandemic became the highest priority for COEs, and as a result they were collaborating more without being competitive.

"I hope that model [fluid, collaborative meeting agenda setting] continues . . . because counties often are somewhat competitive. We're fee-for-service. . . . We have to sell our products, [which] has gotten in the way of what I consider good collaboration in this environment. We just had to let that go. Because nobody had answers. So that's a dynamic shift."

— *Placer COE*

Collaboration About Reopening. At the systems level, schools and districts were preparing for this fall's reopening; their efforts have emphasized bringing teachers together to plan curriculum and instruction to best meet the needs of students. Teaching and learning remained at the heart of all these communications. For example, COEs focused on connecting teachers with school district and COE content experts to build the teachers' capacity in distance learning and provide support while they adjust their teaching.

"As we talked to teachers, we found out they're really overwhelmed by all of the coronavirus resources, so we've used our folks to really whittle down and try to [identify] what are some really good true effective ones [resources] that we can get out to our districts and on our web page."

— *Tehama COE*

"The most comprehensive [reopening plans] in terms of operations, transportation, instruction, and facilities are [those of] the Santa Clara County Office. The Los Angeles County Office of Education also has a good website up now."

— *Napa COE*

Collaboration for Assessment Needs. With schools closed and assessments suspended,[10] COEs were considering new ways to think about students' needs for when schools reopen, such as addressing students' learning loss and well-being.

"We really shifted what metrics we are using to inform our reopening specific to identifying and addressing learning loss, what are the social-emotional impacts to our students and our families, and how are we going to collect that information to meet the needs of our students when we reopen."

— *OCDE*

"The number of kids that need [to be] assessed, especially in preschool, has continued to grow. We just this week started doing assessments and creating an environment where parents can come in with a teacher with barriers as appropriate, based on what the need is, and

do those assessments, but probably the biggest need was assessments kept piling up."

— *Tehama COE*

Regarding how they could meet the new teaching and assessment needs, three of the five COE leaders mentioned one specific resource that they had obtained through their collaborative networks: The San Diego COE had created and shared a spreadsheet template for districts and schools to collect alternative metrics in lieu of assessment data that would have usually been collected had it not been for school closures.[11]

Communication With Families. Now that parents are playing a bigger part in their children's education, teachers' communication with families is more important than ever. One COE leader described how COE staff were directly assisting parents with schoolwork:

"Parents may not have any idea what to do with their child to complete their schoolwork packet, so staff are dedicating time to coach parents through teaching and learning activities."

— *Tulare COE*

This point is important to highlight because COE staff typically had not directly assisted parents with student schoolwork prior to the pandemic. Due to the pandemic and school closures, this COE reported, the instructional plans that the county-level content specialists had developed with school districts had been interrupted, so COE staff had stepped in to serve the community directly.

Sheltering in place and distance learning had made community and parent engagement much more important, with the school no longer serving as a physical hub for educators to connect with parents and community members. Because of this new dynamic, school districts have been communicating with families to gather information about their preferences on reopening plans. The Napa COE

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10 On March 18, 2020, in response to the pandemic, Governor Newsom issued an executive order to suspend standardized testing for California K–12 students (Executive Order N-30-20). https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/18/governor-newsom-issues-executive-order-to-suspend-standardized-testing-for-students-in-response-to-covid-19-outbreak/

11 California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, 2020

Voices From the Field: County Office of Education Leaders Discuss COVID-19's Impact on California Education

described families in Napa as having a variety of opinions, without any single, clear, consensus on an approach to reopening.

> "Our districts are doing a fantastic job of [reaching] out to families right now to identify how they're feeling about reopening plans. I think that's critical to this whole [reopening] process: Do our families feel safe, do they want [students] to come back in person, gathering their perspective about the distance learning experience? It's important information to gather and to use as we develop reopening plans."
>
> — *OCDE*

One COE leader, who requested anonymity, identified the challenge to balance accountability with how to best assist school districts with serving students during distance learning:

> "We were really curious about the degree of engagement that districts were having with their students. . . . [For example, what is] the type of work that they're giving them, whether it's packets, Zoom, and how many of their students are regularly responding to [teachers]?"
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> — *COE requested anonymity*

National Survey Data Related to Communication. The ATP and ASLP national surveys asked about several areas of communication during the pandemic, including training on family engagement, contact with students and/or families, and sharing specific types of information with families. It did not address questions of professional collaboration.

The majority of teachers nationwide indicated that they had not received training on how to engage families in home learning (76 percent) or on how to help families access non-instructional supports (59 percent). Nevertheless, the teachers had been contacting families. Twenty-one percent of teachers reported that they had been able to contact approximately three-quarters of their students and/or their families, and 59 percent reported having contacted

"nearly all or all" of their students and/or families. Teachers also were asked how often they, their school, or their district had shared certain types of information with at least some families. A majority of teachers and school leaders responded that they had shared information with at least some families at least twice regarding how to help children with academic instruction (74 percent of teachers; 82 percent of school leaders); how to support their children's social and emotional needs (55 percent of teachers; 67 percent of leaders); how to promote students physical activity (55 percent of teachers; 73 percent of leaders); and how to access non-instructional services such as meals or health services (80 percent of teachers; 84 percent of leaders).

Family engagement was a concern for school leaders nationwide. They reported that the inability to communicate with students and families had limited the amount or type of distance learning materials that they had been able to provide: Most (61 percent) indicated that this was a minor limitation, and some (11 percent) indicated that it was a major limitation. The majority of school leaders expected greater engagement with families moving forward: 57 percent reported that family engagement would become a higher priority for them when their school reopens, relative to what it had been before the school closed.

Equity Issues During COVID-19

All five COE interviewees talked about schools and districts facing a variety of serious challenges around access to what is needed for distance learning at home, including internet connectivity, a device, and parents' and students' familiarity with technology. Yet, the COEs also described innovative solutions that LEAs were pursuing to get students learning online. Nonetheless, equity issues related to supporting specific groups of students were paramount.

Internet Connectivity. After neighboring Kings COE had partnered with an internet provider company to provide internet for students, Tulare COE talked about wanting to do the same to provide low-cost internet service for students to access and participate

in distance learning. However, the issue of connectivity is not as simple as LEAs providing laptops or hotspots because some rural areas of the state are isolated and lack cell tower coverage or broadband infrastructure.

> "The COE has plenty of hotspots but not cell phone coverage to use the hotspots. . . . As a state, or nation, we're going to have to get to a point where everyone has internet connection like everyone has water and electricity, especially if we continue this way. It's just not equitable access."
>
> — *Tehama COE*

Conversely, for a COE that has more urban, larger districts, the challenge of connectivity as an equity issue comes about not because of a lack of infrastructure, isolation, or cell phone tower coverage, but because students and families do not have internet service and most likely cannot afford it.

> "We have districts that are saying [they] have connectivity with almost 100 percent of our students and then we have some large districts in lower socioeconomic areas that struggle with up to a third of our students who were not initially connected, which is huge. This is an equity issue that our districts are working vehemently to address. . . . We already have an achievement gap, the intent is to make sure that we're not widening it during this time."
>
> — *OCDE*

According to research from the Public Policy Institute of California, 55 percent of low-income households in California have broadband at home, meaning almost half of low-income homes in California do not have high-speed connectivity for their children, which contributes to worsening education equity issues during the pandemic.

After LEAs focused on each priority of connectivity, such as getting Wi-Fi service, cell phone coverage, or hotspots, then their efforts turned toward ensuring that students have access to a device, such as a laptop or Chromebook. Furthermore, LEAs simultaneously have needed to focus on curriculum and instruction so that students do not experience learning loss or lack academic rigor.

> "The priority was access on getting computers or laptops in the hands of all kids and then also internet connections. Our county office wasn't supporting the purchase of hotspots anymore because they sold out really fast. We found we could refurbish old cell phones, even flip phones, to work as a hotspot by turning off all the calling mechanisms, but leaving it on as a hotspot backup plan for access."
>
> — *Napa COE*

> "[Districts] still have some students that they're trying to get . . . some sort of laptop distributed to, but some [students] are in more rural areas where Wi-Fi internet is still a little bit of a sticky issue. So, trying to make sure it's not about having the actual device. I think most of our students have the devices but it's about ensuring the parents know how to use the device and know how to help their kids log in, especially the younger kids to log in when they're supposed to log in and look for the class session when they're supposed to. . . . Family engagement in that area is a big need for our districts."
>
> — *Napa COE*

> "But there's equitable access. . . . That's going to be the biggest challenge for [districts], . . . after the technology piece, is making sure . . . the kids have access to rigorous curriculum and instruction and not just kind of treading water or waiting for us to go back to normal."
>
> —*Napa COE*

Communication to Serve Students With Special Needs and English Learners. The COE interview questions specifically asked how services had

changed for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and for other student populations. COE leaders expressed a positive outlook on communication among key stakeholders such as service providers, students, parents, and teachers.

> "We've continued to provide as many of the related services as possible as defined in our students' IEPs. The use of common platforms for the online instruction has also been effective and to bring multiple service providers together."
>
> *— OCDE*

Another interviewee mentioned Marin County as an exemplar for COEs to follow because that county had completely transitioned its classroom model online for students with IEPs:

> "IEPs were amended for a distance learning format. They took time and intentionality to amend those IEPs. Our SELPA [Special Education Local Planning Area] offices opened up one day a week to get specialized equipment out into the field as much as possible to those families. Plus, our SELPA has been working closely with other local agencies to support parents to make sure the parents are trained on those materials, the devices, and their academic special needs specialists. We were working with teachers and with students on a regular basis to make sure that those students were receiving the services required."
>
> *— Napa COE*

Tehama County reported positive outcomes for students with disabilities as well, due to the connections, resources, and strong communication of particular staff:

> "Our SPED director is just incredible; she's really connected at the state level and regionally, and our district really respects her. They [districts] have leaned on her a lot to try to navigate, [asking] what do we need to do as far identifying IEPs, do we change placement

letters, what resources are available? With her resources and background, she is in daily communication with most of our special needs teachers."

> *— Tehama COE*

The Orange County leader shared hopeful outcomes regarding English learners:

> "We have seen a concerted effort from many of our districts during this difficult time to provide engaging and structured, integrated, and designated supports within the distance learning content. I think moving out of this [distance learning], those teachers may have increased skills to not only embed these essential supports within in-person content instruction but consistently consider these strategies as part of the design of asynchronous learning opportunities."
>
> *— OCDE*

National Survey Data Related to Equity. The national surveys for teachers and school leaders probed issues of equity, including connectivity, guidance, and training to support specific groups of students.

School leaders estimated that 17 percent of students in their schools currently did not have access to the internet at home. A large majority of school leaders (88 percent) reported that their school had provided digital devices (e.g., tablets or laptops) to at least some students during the time their school building was closed. One half (50 percent) of school leaders had provided hotspots for students to access the internet from home, and 90 percent had provided information about how to obtain free or discounted internet access to at least some students during the time their school building was closed.

Lack of internet access and technology devices for students and concerns about providing equitable instruction to all students (e.g., students with disabilities) were concerns for school leaders nationwide. They reported that students' lack

of internet access limited the amount or type of distance learning materials that schools had been able to provide while the school building was closed: A majority (62 percent) of school leaders indicated that this was a minor limitation, and one quarter (25 percent) indicated that it was a major limitation. Similarly, the lack of technology devices limited the amount or type of distance learning materials that school leaders had been able to provide: 42 percent reported this was a minor limitation, and 22 percent indicated that it was a major limitation. And 85 percent of school leaders reported that concerns about providing equitable instruction to all students was a minor or major limitation (combined).

Teachers were asked whether they had *received adequate guidance and support* (from any source in their school system) to address the learning needs of specific groups of students while their school building was closed, and school leaders were asked whether their teachers had *received adequate guidance and support* to address these needs. In all cases, there was a gap between the responses of teachers and school leaders, with teachers indicating that they had received less guidance and support than what was reported by school leaders. For meeting the needs of students with mild or moderate disabilities, 25 percent of teachers answered that they had received adequate guidance and support, whereas 81 percent of school leaders reported that their teachers had received such guidance and support. For students with severe disabilities, 23 percent of teachers reported yes, as compared to 51 percent of school leaders. Twenty five percent of teachers indicated that they had received adequate guidance and support for their English learner students, whereas school leaders indicated that 63 percent of their teachers had received adequate guidance and support. While 23 percent of teachers answered yes with regard to students affected by poverty, 74 percent of school leaders did so. One-third of teachers (34 percent) noted that they had received adequate guidance and support for meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness, while more than half of school leaders (54 percent) reported that their teachers had received guidance and support to address the learning needs of this student group.

Teachers were also asked about training that they had received over the course of the past year. A little more than one quarter of teachers (28 percent) reported having received training on how to provide distance learning opportunities that will be accessible to all students, regardless of resources at home (e.g., device or internet access). A similar share of teachers (29 percent) reported having received training on how to differentiate distance learning opportunities to meet individual students' needs (e.g., students with IEPs), and 41 percent reported having received training on how to help families access non-instructional supports.

Looking ahead, teachers and school leaders indicated that addressing achievement gaps would be a higher priority for them when their school building reopens, relative to what it had been before closure: 69 percent of both teachers and school leaders indicated so.

Key Considerations

The interviews with COE leaders in California indicate both challenges and bright spots in terms of professional collaboration, communication, and equity. With each challenge that the COE leaders spoke about, they also described innovative solutions they were exploring to meet the new needs that school closures had created. From COE staff bringing school district superintendents together to learn from each other about adapting to the school closures, and COEs having old cell phones refurbished to provide students with access to the internet, as well as other examples, it was clear that communication and collaboration had become more important and that COEs were also keeping equity at the center of all that was being planned at school, district, and county levels.

Another important takeaway from the COEs' perspectives and the national surveys is a recognition of the array of levels, settings, and daily routines in which educators work. COE staff can operate and perceive changes in practice differently than district staff, school leaders, and teachers. As indicated by the national survey data, even school leaders and teachers have unique needs and can

have differing perspectives on similar issues. It can also be harder for teachers, operating at the classroom level, to perceive changes from initiatives happening at the county level. Views from one group of educators should not be assumed to carry over to other groups within the system.

Additionally, perceptions of COVID-related challenges and of practices to combat the challenges might be different for educators working in different environments. While those in office settings might see many ways to transition their work to a remote environment, those in more hands-on or classroom-based roles might not have the same opportunities. Researchers should continue documenting the perspectives of educators in different roles and work environments to understand the unique innovations, needs, and challenges of all educators. Lastly, monitoring the trends in collaboration practices and equity gaps is a critical priority.

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