



Continuous Learning Plans

Mid-Year Report

Tennessee Department of Education | February 2021





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Developing Continuous Learning Plans

COVID-19's Impact on PK-12 Education in Tennessee

The events that began in March of 2020 have forever changed the education landscape nationwide and in Tennessee. On March 2, deadly tornadoes struck communities in West and Middle Tennessee, killing 25 Tennesseans, injuring more than 300 and causing \$1.1 billion in total damages, including damage to multiple school buildings. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was then announced in Tennessee on March 5. Soon after, on March 12, Governor Lee issued Executive Order No. 14, declaring a State of Emergency related to the pandemic. On March 16, Governor Lee and Commissioner Schwinn encouraged schools to close due to the spread of COVID-19 in the state.



Schools and districts still coping with the effects of the tornadoes rapidly shifted to virtual learning, working tirelessly to continue to provide meals to students, provide instruction and resources remotely, and distribute devices and internet hot spots.

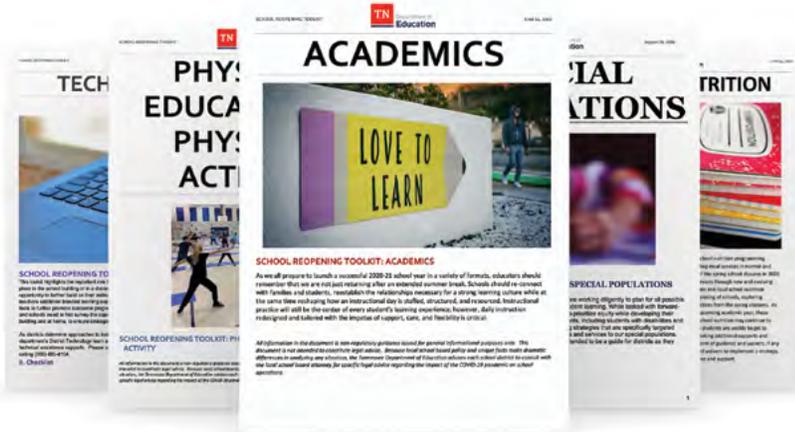
The Tennessee Department of Education (also referred to throughout as “the department”) provided support to schools and districts as they dealt with these unprecedented circumstances via dozens of school closure toolkits, thrice-weekly superintendent calls, in addition to one-on-one support provided by department leadership and our Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) Offices. Further, several local organizations partnered with the department to provide resources and supports to schools and families.

Specifically, on March 25, the department launched a [partnership with PBS](#) to broadcast ELA and math lessons statewide, creating more than 300 instructional video lessons for students in grades 1st through 8th. On March 30 the department and the Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation (GELF) partnered to provide free access to families statewide to ReadyRosie, an early education online platform that provides short videos and free resources with simple, engaging activities for Tennessee families and children, ages birth through 3rd grade, to do at home. In addition, on April 15, the department launched a [STE\(A\)M Resource Hub](#) in partnership with the Tennessee STEM Innovation Network to provide educators and families with resources to use with students during COVID-19 related school closures. In addition, over the course of the spring and summer of 2020 the department was approved for 13 waivers related to school nutrition to allow districts the flexibility needed to continue feeding students during school closures and remote learning.





Based on school and district experiences in the spring of 2020, the education community knew that reopening schools was critical not just to the academic growth of all students, but also to their health and wellbeing; this was especially true for our most vulnerable children. Therefore, as the 2019-20 school year came to a close, Tennessee’s entire education system pivoted to safely and effectively reopening schools for the 2020-21 school year. District leaders spent their summers preparing for an unprecedented school year, planning not just for the academic needs of students but their health and safety as well. Districts planned for multiple operating models (in-person, remote, hybrid) and developed plans to transition between those models as needed based on COVID-19 case data.



To support districts and schools in their planning, the department developed more than 25 reopening toolkits on a host of topics including academics, technology, school nutrition, safety and operations, among others – all designed to help as many schools safely open for in-person instruction as possible.



Additionally, by October of 2020 the department had invested more than \$200 million in grants to support school reopening and COVID-19 response. This included more than \$80 million through a partnership with the Governor’s office and Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) to provide masks, face shields, gloves and cleaning supplies directly to schools, \$50 million in technology grants, \$15 million for WiFi access, and more. Finally, the department also worked quickly to provide free, online learning resources and professional development for educators, in the event that schools needed to temporarily shift to virtual or hybrid instructional models.

\$80M+

PPE & disinfecting materials for nurses & school-site staff (only state in the country to do this for a full year)



\$50M

Technology Grants pays for 1/3 of computers for 3rd - 12th graders



\$15M

WiFi & Support Grants provides internet access to over 100,000 families



\$11M

Reopening Grants to support districts & Continuous Learning Plans implementation



\$8M

to support districts in **serving students with disabilities**



\$5M

Additional Grants to Districts to Support Students with Disabilities



\$1M

IDEA Technology Grant

2020-21 IDEA Innovation Grant

\$1M

\$1M

Special Education Additional Endorsement Grant for Teachers



\$60M+
Grants to Support Academics



Data as of October 2020.
A portion of the funds were allocated to higher education institutions.

OVER \$200M IN COVID-19-RELATED GRANTS (SO FAR)...



State Board of Education Emergency Rule and Policy

As districts and schools worked diligently to plan for resuming school in the fall, the Tennessee State Board of Education (SBE) promulgated the Continuous Learning Plan (CLP) Emergency Rule 0520-01-17 and Policy 3.210 on June 22, 2020. Pursuant to the SBE emergency rule and policy, the CLP is intended to address how a local education agency (LEA) or public charter school will continue to provide quality instruction to students in the event of COVID-19 related disruptions to traditional school operations during the 2020-21 school year.

The CLP emergency rule and policy provided the minimum requirements for each CLP and required the CLPs to be submitted to the department for review and approval. Approved CLPs would ensure that LEAs and public charter schools could count days when instruction was provided toward the 180-day requirement in the law (pursuant to the CLP). As part of SBE Rule 0520-01-17, the department was tasked with submitting two reports to the SBE to report on the CLP process and implementation in districts. This report serves as the first of these, with the second to be submitted to the State Board of Education no later than July 31, 2021.

Continuous Learning Plan Review Process

Pursuant to the State Board of Education's rule and policy, on June 26, 2020, the department produced a [template, rubric, and guidance documents](#) to support districts in developing CLPs. A few weeks later, the department also released an FAQ document, artifact planner, and additional guidance related to planning a remote instructional day. The department approached CLP development with an artifact-based approach so that districts could submit artifacts they already had or needed to develop as part of their planning process to ensure it was a useful and authentic process for districts. For example, rather than explaining how the school or district would meet the 6.5 hours of required instructional time, they were able to submit the schedules they had already created (or needed to create) for each grade level.

The department's CLP template required as little narrative response as possible, mostly to describe the artifacts that were submitted. While this proved to be a more simplified process for districts, it made the review by the department more time consuming as it was sometimes difficult to "find" evidence among documents (sometimes as high as 200+ pages).





The Continuous Learning Plan included eight sections:

- 1 Cover Page**
This section included basic information. 
- 2 Models**
Districts and charter schools listed the operational models (in-person, remote, hybrid) they planned to use to start the school year in K, Elem, Middle, and High School. They also had to explain any notable differences in models between schools, aimed at ensuring equity in approach across a district. 
- 3 Instruction**
Districts and charter schools explained how they intend to provide standards-based instruction for remote students. It asked them to explain the instructional materials they planned to use, and provide schedules illustrating how they would meet the 6.5 hours of required instruction (4 hours for K) for each content area and grade band. It also required an explanation how they were prioritizing in-person instruction for our youngest learners. 
- 4 Attendance**
This section required districts and charter schools to establish a policy for taking attendance in a remote learning setting. 
- 5 Information Technology**
Districts and charter schools described how they intended to ensure all students have access to devices and internet in the event that they shifted to remote learning, including plans for acquiring and distributing devices, troubleshooting and technical assistance, security and safety, and contingency planning. 
- 6 Professional Development**
This section focused on how the district or charter school intended to provide strong PD, learning and support for staff who may not be experienced in delivering remote instruction and engaging students in these learning environments. 
- 7 Monitoring**
Districts and charter schools described how they would monitor the implementation of their CLP, including monitoring instructional delivery, and audit and oversight procedures. 
- 8 Communications**
Districts and charter schools described how they would communicate the details of their CLP and its implementation to stakeholders, including students, parents, and staff. The department's review focused on accessibility and audience. 



The department's [rubric](#) contained four possible rating categories for each of these sections. In order to receive approval for each section, the district or charter school needed to average a three or higher overall and could not have any scores of one. If any sections received a score of two the CLP was conditionally approved for the purposes of operating school, but the district or school would be required to continue to revise the CLP until it received a score of three, which had to occur by September 30, 2020.

The review process and technical assistance to districts and charter schools required tremendous capacity from the department and involved a significant amount of coordination and organization. The department organized five cross-functioning teams to review the 145 district¹ and 115 charter school applications, with a sixth central team that tracked submissions and organized the scoring processes and structures. Each cross-functioning team included a subject-matter expert for each area of the rubric. In early July, these teams participated in norming sessions for each section of the rubric to ensure consistency in reviews and feedback. The department utilized its ePlan platform to ensure an efficient process that alleviated the burden of emailing documents back and forth and allowed districts to upload plans and artifacts directly to the department. The department was also able to provide feedback directly to districts through the platform such that all reviewers and support teams could see and have time-stamped tracking of communication and approval actions.

The department provided numerous supports to districts and charter schools throughout the planning and revision process. This included department office hours, including office hours specifically for charter schools, conducted for five weeks beginning the week of July 6. The department also provided significant on-demand technical assistance with individual districts and charter schools. The review teams worked one-on-one with numerous districts, the eight regional CORE offices were in districts daily as they worked to develop their plans and make revisions, and the state's charter school office worked one-on-one with charter schools.

The department also developed a variety of responsive tools and resources in the first two weeks of the planning window as district needs emerged. These resources included samples pulled from already submitted district plans, annotated rubrics to elaborate on requirements, and additional guidance documents. Particularly helpful, a guidance document called, "[What is an Instructional Day?](#)" provided sample schedules for various grade levels to illustrate how districts and schools might plan to meet the 6.5 hours of instruction utilizing a blend of synchronous and asynchronous instruction.

1 The state waived the CLP requirement for two districts and two agencies that operate under unique circumstances where a CLP was not appropriate: The State Board of Education, Carroll County, Department of Corrections, Department of Children's Services.



Continuous Learning Plan Submissions

On average, plans were reviewed, scored, and returned within two business days. A district or charter school whose plan was returned with feedback was required to revise and resubmit until the plan satisfied requirements for approval. Review teams, regional CORE offices, and the state's charter schools division provided detailed technical assistance to those districts and schools who needed additional support revising their plans. Approximately 34 percent of CLPs were approved on first submission, and an additional 47 percent were approved on second submission (81% total approved within two submissions). All other districts and charter schools required multiple submissions to ensure their CLPs were approved. All CLPs were approved by September 18, 2020.

Once all CLPs were approved, the regional CORE offices reviewed each CLP to identify trends across district plans². The review process was a manual process and included some regional variation. At the time of this review, 94% of district CLPs had been approved. Any CLPs subsequently approved were not included in the analysis. The following trends emerged in CLP submissions from this review.

Instructional Materials and Schedules

Most districts (91 percent) planned to use the same ELA and math instructional materials for both in-person and remote learning. The majority of districts planned to provide a mix of synchronous and asynchronous instruction for remote learners. A few districts planned for only synchronous instruction, mostly in the lower grades. Plans for asynchronous learning time generally included a mix of hard copy materials or materials on a zip drive sent home with students, along with online access to content including assignments and instructional videos utilizing technology purchases (outlined below). Plans for synchronous instruction typically included the use of online platforms (including Google Classroom) or video conference platforms (like Zoom or Microsoft Teams) to deliver instruction. A smaller number of districts (about one in four) planned to use phone conferencing as well.

Professional Development

All districts planned to provide training for teachers on using various technology tools and devices, as well as best practices for teaching remotely. Many districts also planned to incorporate training on their newly adopted ELA instructional materials, including how to adapt them to a remote environment, as well as training on how to specifically support students with special needs in a remote environment. In addition, many districts had training planned on mitigating learning loss and using assessment data to identify student needs. Districts generally planned a mix of online and in-person professional development over the summer. The majority of districts planned to leverage the free professional development opportunities offered by the state and many others also planned additional professional development locally.

Internet and Devices

More than half of districts reported having 1:1 device access for students at the start of the year for grades 3-12. Districts who were not 1:1 found it significantly more challenging to plan for remote learning. These districts were forced to plan to send work home and utilize phone calls with students for synchronous support in the event they needed to close but recognized this was not ideal. Districts approached internet access for their students in a few different ways. Some planned to open school labs with social distancing, while others (approximately 50 percent) distributed Wi-Fi hot spot devices or set up community hot spots on school buses or in school parking lots.

2 This review of district plans was conducted by regional CORE offices after plans were approved to both capture statewide data and to inform their support of districts within their regions. For this reason, charter school CLPs are not included in this data set/summary.



Reopening Schools

Despite having CLPs in place, districts across the state remained committed to opening in-person and the vast majority began the school year with both an in-person and remote option (nearly 90%). As schools began to reopen, the department provided a variety of supports to districts, including releasing more than 20 reopening toolkits; launching the *TN Substitute Teacher Jobs Connection* to support districts in identifying substitute teachers; coordinating with the Tennessee Department of Health to provide health guidance to schools; and launching the first dashboard in the country by a department of education on September 9, 2020 to allow districts to report weekly on their district operating models, individual school operating models, and COVID-19 case counts for students and staff.

Districts and charter schools were considering and preparing for a variety of reopening models.

IN-PERSON FAMILY CHOICE

Open in-person with traditional schedules. All districts who planned to open fully in-person also allowed an option for families to choose to keep their student(s) fully remote.



FULL-TIME REMOTE

All students learn remotely daily.



HYBRID SCHEDULES

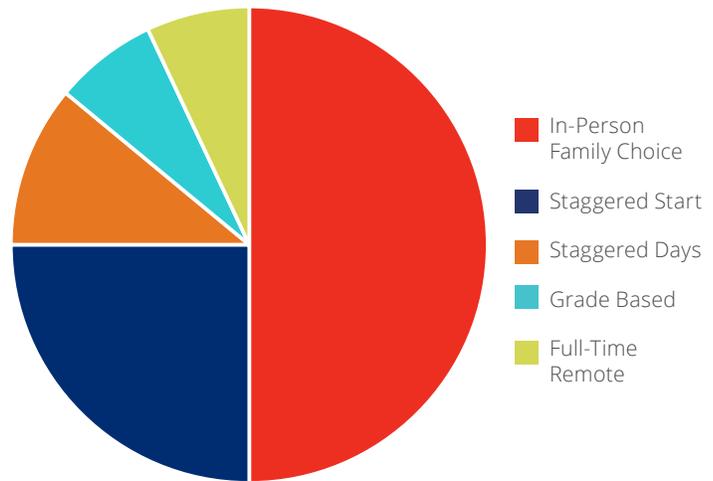
Staggered Start: Students return to school on different days for a defined period of time (typically a few weeks) with a phase-in to returning all students to the building at the same time.

Staggered Days: Only a portion of students attend in-person each day while the rest remain virtual (typically based on last name), and groups alternate throughout the week.

Grade-Based: Open in-person for some grade levels, while other grade levels are fully remote (typically early grades were in-person).



At the end of July, based on tracking by the regional CORE offices, about 50 percent of districts planned to open with a more traditional in-person operating model, while still providing an optional remote model based on family choice. Another 25 percent were planning to open in-person with a staggered start. Eleven percent of districts planned to open with a staggered day model. Seven percent of districts were planning to use a grade-based approach to reopening, mostly in the form of having K-2 classes fully in-person, while keeping older students fully remote or staggered in attendance. No school district opened fully in-person without at least a virtual option for students.



During the month of August districts and charter schools were making decisions day-to-day about opening models and start dates, with many delaying start dates by a week or more based on changes in community COVID-19 rates or to allow additional time to plan for re-opening.

On July 22, 2020, the first district started school through an in-person, hybrid schedule, with a remote option for families. By September 8, all districts across the state had resumed school, whether in-person, on a hybrid schedule, or fully remote. The majority of districts (63 percent) started during the weeks of August 3 and 10. 88 percent of districts opened with some form of hybrid operating model (including in-person with parental choice for remote learning), while 12 percent started the school year fully virtual. Most of these districts transitioned to a hybrid or in-person model within a few weeks. Based on district-reported dashboard data³, by the end of September 2020, only four percent of districts were fully remote.

Between September 21, 2020 and February 2, 2021, the percentage of remote districts varied each week from a low of three percent in mid-October, to a high of 12 percent in the weeks leading up to and following the winter break. The vast majority of districts worked to open and remain open with an in-person option, navigating the extreme challenges of shifting to remote learning at the classroom, school, and district level only when necessary and for as short a time as possible. The state's two largest school systems remained fully remote for all or most of the first semester and in February 2021 announced a phased transition back to in-person options. The majority of Tennessee's charter schools are authorized by and utilize services provided by these two districts, leading the majority of them to open remotely as well.

³ It is important to note that this information was based on information reported to the state from districts on a weekly basis, and not all districts updated this dashboard weekly. Some of these numbers may be based on outdated information from districts.



Implementing Continuous Learning Plans

On August 13, 2020 the department announced that Governor Lee had invested \$11 million of Tennessee's Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) funds into school reopening grants for districts and charter schools to support implementation of CLPs. Grants ranged from \$5,000 for individual charter schools to \$125,000 for the state's largest districts. The grants were intended to support purchases necessary to implement sections three (instruction), five (IT), and six (professional development) of their CLPs. Allowable uses included, among other things, purchasing supplemental instructional materials, supporting distance learning, building IT support infrastructures, purchasing remote learning platforms, and providing professional development for staff.

In January 2021, the department administered a survey⁴ to all districts and charter schools to collect information about the implementation of CLPs. 100 percent of districts and charter schools completing a CLP submitted a response to the survey, providing a valuable look at what is happening on the ground in Tennessee. This data, combined with the department's anecdotal knowledge of district practices, informed this section of the report.

Use of Continuous Learning Plans

As the school year began, districts utilized their CLPs in a variety of ways, including:

- For students whose families chose full-time remote learning.
- When schools shifted to remote learning if there were enough positive cases or exposure in a school, or if they could not adequately staff classrooms due to teacher quarantine.
- When districts shifted to remote learning due to increasing community spread or to prevent spread of COVID-19 following holidays and breaks.

At the time districts and schools were developing their CLPs and planning for remote learning, most anticipated needing to utilize their CLP to shift classrooms, schools, or possibly even the entire district to remote learning, while also creating plans for families that chose to keep their students fully remote. In some cases, district and charter school plans were the same for unexpected closure and full-time remote learners, and others developed different approaches for these two instances. In reality, districts had to be much more flexible in applying remote learning strategies, as the impact that individual student and teacher quarantines would have on the ability to run schools was not fully understood at that time. Schools and districts quickly found themselves applying their CLP to individual students in ways they had not anticipated.

Nearly half of school districts reported that 40 percent or more of their students had been quarantined at least once during the first semester, creating an environment where students and teachers were moving in and out of remote and in-person learning on an individual basis. This required quick adaptation on the part of district and school leaders to apply their district-wide plans to individual students and teachers. For example, in one district, some students had only attended school in-person for 15 days within a nine-week period due to repeated quarantines, creating new concerns for learning gaps with those students. Teacher quarantines also presented multiple challenges. On average, districts reported more than 16 percent of educators had missed 10 percent or more of instructional days.

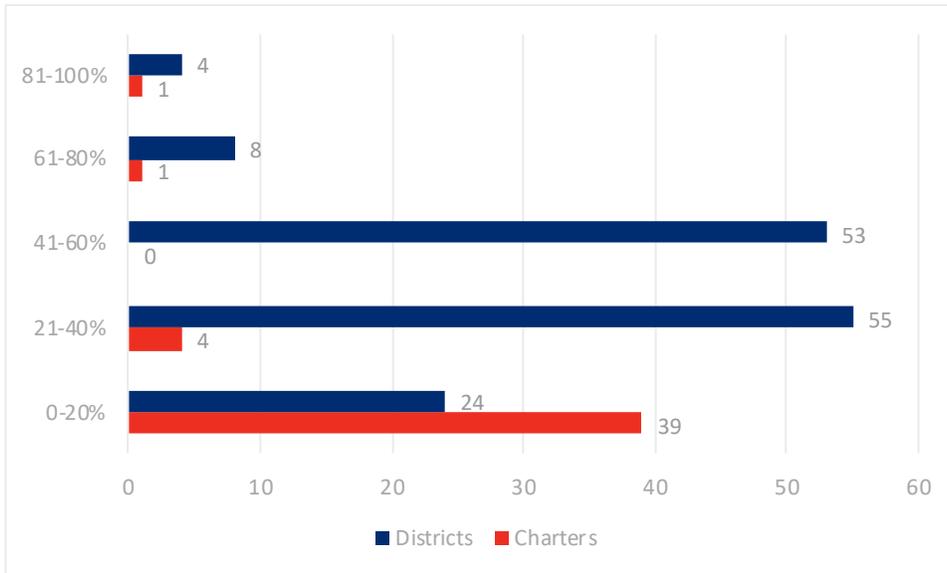
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As one district leader noted, *“We had to put a substitute teacher in the classroom to monitor student engagement and behavior while the teacher is teaching the class from home. This creates an additional expense as well as a shortage of substitutes.”*

⁴ It is important to note the limitations of this data collection. It was self-reported by districts and charter schools and subject to interpretation of the information requested. Any percentages provided represent the average percent reported by districts and charter schools and does not represent an average of all students in the state.



Average Percentage of Students Quarantined at Least Once: By District and Charter School



For students whose families chose to keep them fully remote, district and school policies varied around when students could choose to switch models. Some districts and schools allowed students to switch from remote to in-person or vice versa on a rolling basis. Others only allowed changes after each nine-week grading period. As a result, the percentage of students in full-time remote learning changed day-to-day in some cases.

However, by the end of January 2021, districts reported that on average 17 percent of their students had been enrolled in full-time remote learning for the majority or all of the first semester. Among individual districts, this percentage generally ranged from two percent to 35 percent with a small number of outliers. Charter schools generally presented a different picture, with schools reporting that on average 91 percent of students were engaged in full-time remote learning. This is, again, generally attributable to the fact that most charter schools are located in school districts that provided full or mostly remote instruction.

Once districts and schools successfully resumed instruction, identifying student needs and learning gaps was prioritized. To assist districts in this effort, the department released a suite of “checkpoint” assessments on August 10, 2020 that districts and schools could use at no cost to assess student mastery of concepts from the prior grade utilizing a new innovative assessment platform called [Schoolnet](#). The state’s regional CORE offices and Office of Standards and Materials also provided resources and supports to districts in planning to address learning loss, particularly in mathematics.

District and school leaders worked flexibly and creatively to assess individual student needs amidst some unexpected challenges. One charter school created frequent formal and informal assessment checkpoints throughout instructional modules to determine what students were learning.



A district leader also noted the importance of a data-driven approach saying, “We utilized our existing Universal Screener, which the majority of students had used in school and were already familiar with, to identify student gaps in learning. This gave us longitudinal data that lent legitimacy to what we were seeing and assisted us in putting prescriptive accelerated learning programs in place for students.”

Numerous districts and schools described developing customized student plans to help promote mastery and accelerate learning recovery, using regular assessments and additional data.

However, some districts and schools expressed concerns about the validity of this student data for remote learners. Concerns over the level of support or collaboration students received from external sources, whether from parents or online tools, led many to question the validity of the data.



Vulnerable Student Groups

A critical component for districts and schools in developing the CLP was ensuring they could meet the needs of vulnerable populations in remote learning. Based on survey data, the average percent of students from vulnerable student groups (students with disabilities, English learners, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students) in full-time remote learning largely resembled the average percent of all students in full-time remote learning. Districts, on average, reported that 17 percent of all students were in full-time remote learning, and reported approximately the same averages for vulnerable student groups. The only exception to this trend is that the average district percent of economically disadvantaged students was slightly higher than the all students group with 29 percent in full-time remote learning⁵.

While most districts reported that the percent of students from vulnerable groups in full-time remote learning was similar to the percent of all students in full-time remote learning, the potential impact of a lack of in-person instruction on vulnerable student groups is more significant.

Many districts and charters utilized individualized tutoring and small group instruction to support remote learners in vulnerable populations. Some created new (or utilized existing) case manager or learner outreach positions to check in directly with remote students and families daily and provide tutoring as necessary. For example, one district provided funding for two remote learning outreach positions at each school to make contact with remote students and provide tutoring and additional support as necessary in the students' home environment.

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One charter school indicated they have *“...been able to provide stronger interventions with our most at-risk students with more one-on-one attention from teachers, our intervention team, and academic coaches in small group formats.”*

While the additional one-on-one supports were valuable, districts and schools still faced challenges in designing individual instruction for at-risk students who need intervention. They also faced challenges working with parents and guardians to bring remote learners to school in-person for universal screening and related supports. One particular challenge voiced by districts and schools was in obtaining appropriate parent or guardian signatures on IEPs and student evaluations. In survey responses, districts and schools described arranging multiple rescheduled dates, conducting phone calls and sending reminders to engage with families.

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One district leader described the challenges with *“...ensuring all students with IEPs are accessing virtual content and intensive intervention, and obtaining consent from all families to provide teletherapies, parent signatures on IEPs and evaluations, and providing sufficient support staff to meet all students' needs.”*

⁵ It is important to note here that we believe districts may have interpreted this question differently when providing data. While this is accurate based on what was reported by districts, we have reason to be cautious in drawing any significant conclusions based on this data.



To support districts with providing services to vulnerable populations in remote learning, particularly students with disabilities, the department provided several grant opportunities.

1

IDEA Technology Grant

\$1 million for Tennessee school districts to support the educational needs of students with disabilities by addressing technology needs that are a result of COVID-19 school closures. Grants were to help districts purchase additional assistive technology and other tools to increase access to services and instruction for students with disabilities during school closures. 126 districts were awarded grants ranging from \$5,510-\$20,000.

2

IDEA Innovation Grant

\$1 million to support districts in implementing innovative ways to remediate for the loss of instruction due to school closures for students with disabilities. 62 districts were awarded grants ranging from \$9,000-\$20,000.

3

Compensatory Services Grant

\$5 million to districts to provide compensatory services and support innovative approaches to addressing the learning needs of students with disabilities. These funds were allocated to all districts through a formula distribution.

While most districts reported that the percent of students from vulnerable student groups in full-time remote learning was similar to the percent of all students in full-time remote learning, the potential impact of a lack of in-person instruction on vulnerable student groups is likely more significant. For example, English Learners may have had less access to the English language or related services they would have received in-person. Similarly, students with disabilities may have had more difficulty receiving in-class accommodations or adjusting to different accommodations in a remote environment. While districts worked hard to provide the highest quality services possible, the same disruptions that impacted all students likely had a larger impact on those who relied on more services that are harder to access remotely.



Early Learners

Districts reported, on average, higher percentages of students in grades Kindergarten, First, and Second attending school in-person as compared to all students. Districts and charters both recognized the importance of providing synchronous instruction to students in early grades, particularly in teaching foundational literacy skills, with districts providing approximately three hours per day of synchronous instruction for virtual learners in these grades, and charter schools providing approximately five hours per day of synchronous instruction.



In survey responses, both districts and charter schools elaborated on the challenges presented by providing remote instruction to students in these early grades.

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For example, one district explained, *“For younger students, developmental early reading skills are a high priority. Virtual instruction creates barriers for students as it is extremely challenging to teach phonemic awareness and phonics to students through a screen.”*

Districts and schools also noted the importance of in-person instruction for younger grades, citing the need for live, direct instruction that can effectively engage young learners. Though, even in-person, challenges remained.

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As explained by one district leader, *“Even in-person, teaching foundational skills such as phonics instruction and letter sounds has been difficult as both students and teachers are wearing masks. This is especially difficult when students are learning to pronounce various letter sounds. It is even more difficult to maintain young learners’ focus and attention on this in remote settings.”*

Most districts and schools are using recently adopted high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) in early literacy, which has helped mitigate some of the challenges with early grade instruction in remote environments. Districts also noted that it was critical to ensure they had their own teachers working with students in these critical grades using their HQIM.

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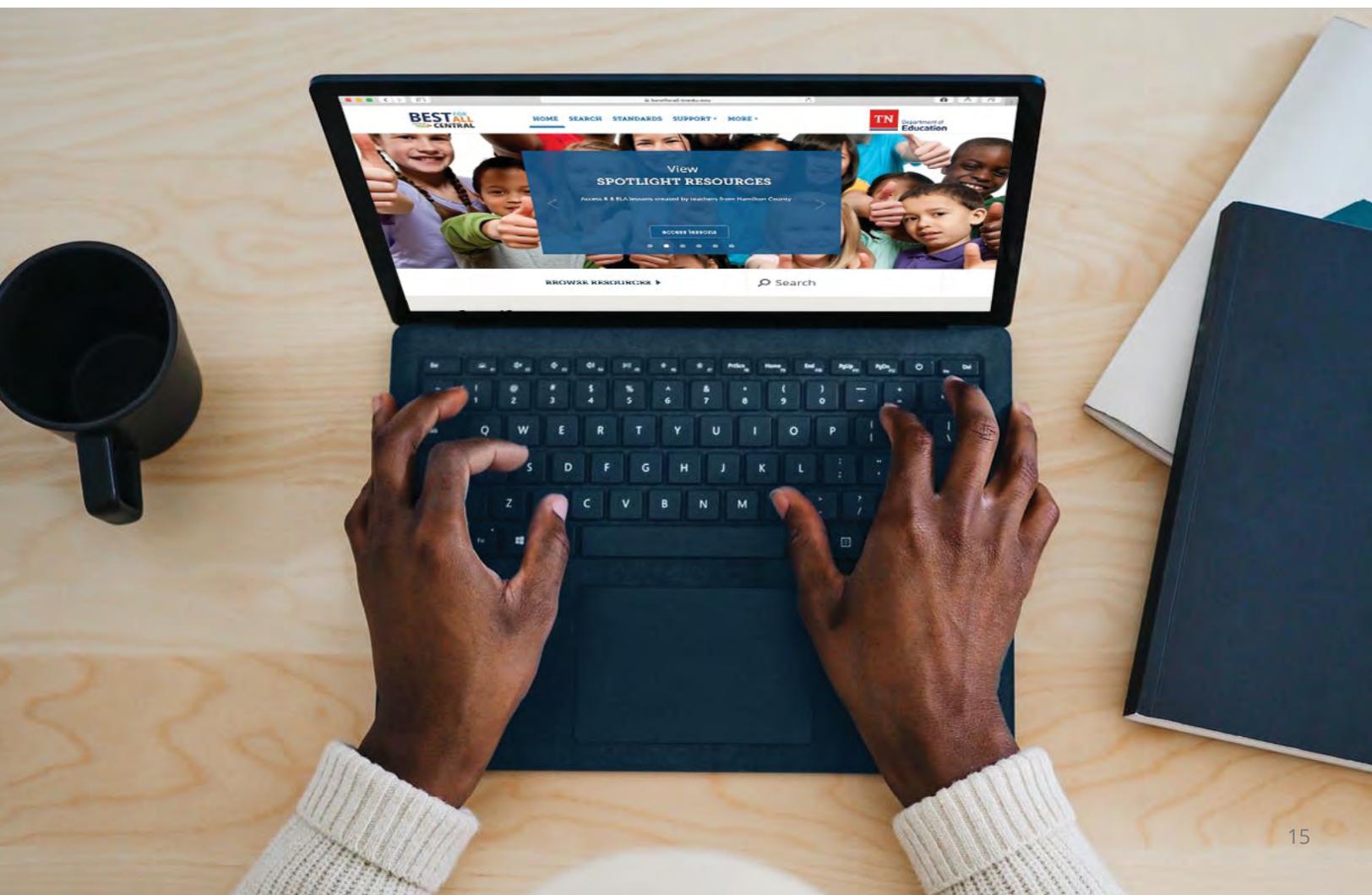
“The most important component of prioritizing K-2 student instruction has been using our HQIM for ELA and math to deliver instruction, whether in-person or remote. Our teachers stream the entire lesson ‘live’ but also record and post the lesson. Assignments for in-person and remote students are the same, and teachers are getting professional learning around how to teach this strong curriculum and make adjustments when students are remote,” described one district leader.



To support districts in providing strong K-2 instruction, particularly in early literacy, on August 6, 2020 the department launched [Best for All Central](#), Tennessee’s Hub for Learning and Teaching, an online tool designed to provide school leaders, educators, and families an extensive collection of high-quality, optional resources for in-person and remote learning environments. Most importantly, the department released a free, optional curriculum supplement to support early literacy instruction, the Tennessee Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement. These materials use a systematic and explicit approach to sounds-first instruction to help all students gain the foundational skills necessary to become proficient readers. This Curriculum Supplement includes:

- [TN Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement Resources](#), including implementation guides, teacher professional learning videos, intervention tools, and model video lessons. Included in these resources are early childhood videos that provide weekly 10- to 15-minute preschool literacy videos featuring five interactive learning centers in which children can play and learn as they watch.
- [TN Foundational Skills Curriculum Sounds-first Activities](#): Videos model teacher moves for the sound-first activities embedded in the supplement instruction and provide practical professional learning supports for foundational reading skills and implementation supports for the TN Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement.

In addition, the department also released a series of Fall 2020 academic classroom videos in ELA, math and science, with the support of several districts across the state. These videos provide weekly content on core areas of instruction that can be used flexibly as needed in remote environments. These resources also include a K-2 math foundations video series, providing eight weeks of foundational math content for families, students, and educators. More than 80% of districts reported having used the materials on Best for All Central during the first semester.





Technology

Technology was an initial challenge, but districts and schools immediately worked to put mitigation measures in place. Districts and schools moved quickly to implement technology support systems and family technology training programs, allowing families to access support quickly without relying on the child’s teacher(s). They utilized state and federal funding to hire technology staff members and purchase laptops, tablets, and Wi-Fi hot spots for students.



As one district leader described, *“With hard work and funding provided by the state we were able to ensure 100 percent of our students had a computer and internet access.”*

Funding provided by the state included \$50 million in remote technology grants funded from the federal Coronavirus Relief Fund. This allowed for more than 426,000 devices to be purchased for students and teachers, and more than 83,000 Wi-Fi and Mi-Fi internet devices to be purchased and distributed to students.

\$50 MILLION IN REMOTE TECHNOLOGY GRANTS

funded from the federal Coronavirus Relief Fund.

426,000+ DEVICES

purchased for students and teachers

83,000+ WI-FI & MI-FI

devices purchased & distributed to students

Nationwide issues with supply chain for devices caused significant challenges for districts in the fall of 2020. Between shortages due to school orders nationwide, and parts that were banned from importation into the U.S., districts and schools sometimes waited up to five months or more to receive orders. In the interim, districts had to be flexible and creative with implementing CLPs when needed, and some chose to remain open when they otherwise might have shifted to remote learning because they did not yet have devices for all students.

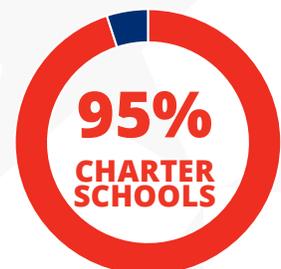
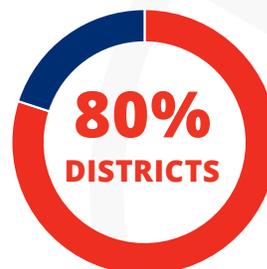
Procuring technology was not the only challenge districts faced. Educators quickly had to become proficient in using all of the new technology and online systems and learn new ways to teach and engage students, all while providing on-demand tech support for students and families.



One district noted, *“Providing tech support to our virtual parents was a need we quickly identified. We used CARES Act funds to hire part-time staff to provide tech support at the school and district level.”*

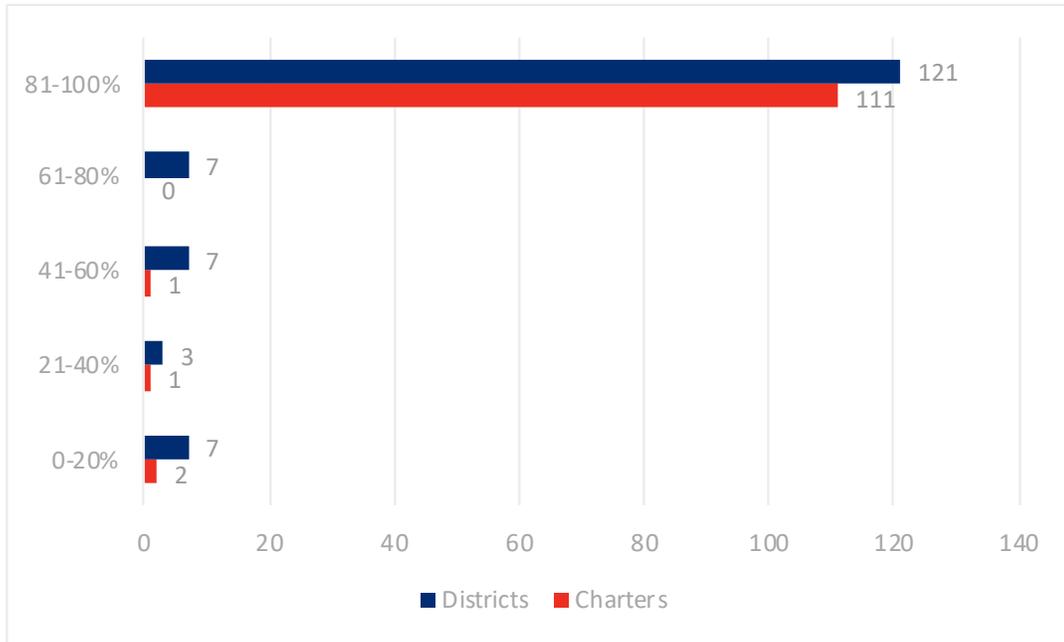
Districts and schools quickly responded to this challenge, providing professional development to educators to support the effective use of technology and alleviating them from tech support duties.

More than 80 percent of districts and 95 percent of charter schools reported providing professional development on remote learning to nearly all of their teachers.





Percent of Certified Teachers Receiving PD in Remote Learning: By District and Charter School



In some cases, the professional development was quite comprehensive.



One charter school explained, *“Professional development opportunities were offered both during the spring, summer, and after the start of the school year. A grant was received for stipends for lead teachers to support their colleagues with remote learning needs. Lessons were modeled, instructional strategies were shared, and support was given on the use of devices and software to enhance remote instruction. A professional development facilitator position was created to offer ongoing support to teachers, staff, and families. This support occurs in the classrooms of teachers, at PD sessions, and in the homes of our students.”*

Districts and schools utilized teams and cohorts of professionals to train and support other teachers in distance learning tools, strategies and technology.

The department also created several state-level partnerships to offer free professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators. More than 20,000 teachers took advantage of free summer professional development sessions on digital learning and teaching offered by Trevecca Nazarene University, and more than 1,000 administrators participated in professional learning on similar topics offered by the University of Tennessee - Knoxville.





Student Engagement

Regardless of whether students were in-person or remote, teachers and other instructional staff worked hard to keep them engaged and provide the best instructional experience possible. However, this still remained an area of challenge noted by many districts and charter schools. For remote learners, the distractions of learning at home could be endless. In many cases, districts and schools cited challenges with students not turning on cameras and not being responsive when called upon, which led them to believe students had logged in to the class but then gone to do something else. Districts and schools also reported that remote learners were more likely to either not turn in assignments or turn in assignments that had evidence of being completed with an inappropriate amount of help from parents or others in the household.

In some cases, these engagement challenges were even more fundamental. Districts reported, on average, approximately 12 percent of students in full-time remote learning missed ten percent or more of instructional days, with that number rising to 25 percent of full-time remote students in charter schools. Additionally, both districts and charters reported that about two percent of full-time remote learners had missed all instructional days so far this school year. One charter leader stated plainly, “At this point in the year, the biggest challenge with remote learners is attendance and engagement.”

To address these challenges, administrators and educators have developed a myriad of strategies, from hosting online “spirit days” and virtual classroom events, to bringing struggling students in one day each week in person to provide more intensive support. In addition to their standard workload, teachers have been calling, texting and emailing students and families to check in, and downloading materials onto flash drives for students with internet connectivity issues. Some teachers have been teaching both in-person and virtual classrooms simultaneously, adapting “on the fly” to fit a new context. At least one district indicated that the ability to keep students on task and engaged was better when remote learning was embedded with the live, in-person instruction happening in classrooms. Students were able to interact with their in-person peers and teachers and felt more a part of a traditional classroom.

One charter school described their mitigation approach as follows, “We have worked to ensure these students attend virtual class through daily outreach to their families, individualized tech support, and attendance competitions. Additionally, second semester we launched learning pods for our most at-risk students, [and] students come to our school building to join their virtual classes, which provides a calm and safe place to join virtual learning, as well as accountability to the student to be logged in for each class.”

Educator Supports

Teachers and other school-based staff have worked tirelessly to support students and provide instruction during an unprecedented year filled with unprecedented challenges. District, school, and state leaders have focused efforts on providing additional health and wellbeing support to educators. The Tennessee Department of Education and the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (TDMHSAS) partnered to make a [COVID-19 emotional support phone line](#) available to educators at no cost. School and district leaders also provided spaces for teachers to participate in self-care activities and devoted time to building stronger relationships and levels of trust.

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One charter leader explained, “*The key to our success was building trusting relationships between administrators and teachers so they could transparently work together to create systems that were reasonable.*”



Even with this additional support and teacher collaboration, concerns about emotional and physical burnout and fatigue remain high. Districts and charters reported that 17 percent of their teachers have missed ten percent or more of instructional days, across both virtual and in-person environments.

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As one district leader said, *“Supporting teachers personally is something we need to address this coming year. Teachers and staff district-wide have been working harder and longer than ever before with very little complaint and often without being prompted. We know that fatigue and burnout is going to be one of the outcomes of living through this year.”*

Conclusion

This pandemic has been unlike any other time in our lives and has shifted the way we educate students in the state of Tennessee. As noted in the department’s [Reopening Schools: Overview Guide for LEAs](#), the pandemic has elevated known gaps, and created tremendous urgency for a child-centered strategy. This is especially true for our youngest learners, those with existing achievement gaps, those in rural communities, and those who need additional school-based services.

It is critical, for so many reasons, that students are able to be in classrooms on a daily basis, and Tennessee schools and districts have worked tirelessly to make that a reality well ahead of the national conversation and emphasis. Recent national data⁶ shows that only 44 percent of school districts across the country were offering full in-person instruction. In Tennessee, students have had a different experience. The vast majority of our students are offered an in-person option and the state should be proud of what the education community has accomplished. In the midst of these challenges arose a tremendous amount of innovation and hard work on the part of district and school leaders, and especially educators.

While the past twelve months have pushed the education community beyond what any of us could have imagined, we also know that what lies ahead may be the hardest work. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students will take months, and likely years, to address – especially for our most vulnerable students. The Tennessee General Assembly recently passed legislation making sweeping education policy changes to address teacher pay, accountability, literacy, and learning loss and acceleration to address the impact of the pandemic. This legislation represents a first-in-the-country executive and legislative education policy response to the urgency we face. The state will use this legislation as a catalyst for enhanced summer programming, tutoring, and early literacy. Similarly, the federal relief funds provide districts and the state with opportunities to invest in safer buildings and deferred maintenance to maintain strong structural and environmental expectations; additional and expanded learning time for our students; a laser-like focus on literacy; more resources to support educator preparation providers and the supply of strong teachers for students; resources to address the mental health needs of students and teachers; and support for secondary programs like innovative high schools and virtual dual-credit and AP classes.

While the future vision for the state is bold, the work remains challenging. Districts, educators, families, and the department have demonstrated a firm commitment to the needs of children this past year, and we will do what is needed and what is right to ensure all students are prepared for life after the classroom. We must make this our unwavering goal and commitment, as the one million students of Tennessee are counting on us to do.

6 Center for Reinventing Public Education, “U-Turn: Surge of COVID Cases Reversing Reopening Progress in America’s School Districts,” January 2021. www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/u_turn_brief_jan-2020_0.pdf