

CONNECTICUT STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION**Hartford**

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, Commissioner of Education

DATE: July 14, 2020

SUBJECT: Report on Student Participation in Distance Learning

Executive Summary

Please find attached the report entitled [Student Participation in Distance Learning: Device/Connectivity Needs, Effective Strategies, Challenges, and State Supports Needed](#).

On behalf of the [Learn from Home Task Force \(LHTF\)](#), the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) conducted a brief survey to gauge the approaches to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the extent of student participation in those offerings and the barriers (especially devices and connectivity) to greater participation. In addition, the survey sought district perspectives on effective strategies to increase student participation in distance learning, the most challenging areas for getting fuller student participation, and the specific supports the State of Connecticut can provide to increase student participation in distance learning. Here's a brief summary of the results:

- Survey responses were received from 170 (84.6 percent) of the 201 potential school districts. These 170 districts enrolled 92.7 percent of the total statewide student population and 95.3 percent of all students statewide who are eligible for free- or reduced-price meals. Therefore, this survey can be considered as representative of the entire statewide population.
- Over 90 percent of students who participated in distance learning after class cancellations due to COVID-19 participated through technology-based online learning while fewer than 10 percent participated through other methods (e.g., printed learning materials/packets, 1:1 phone calls, wellness checks).
- Over 74 percent of all students (approximately 391,000 students) are fully participating in the distance learning offerings of the district. Another 14 percent (approximately 76,000 students) are partially participating, 8 percent are minimally participating (approximately 40,000 students), and 4 percent have not participated (approximately 21,000 students).
- Tens of thousands of students statewide are experiencing the following barriers to greater participation in distance learning:
 - Access to a device in the home – nearly 10 percent (around 50,000 students)
 - Internet access in the home – nearly six percent (over 29,000 students)
 - Family, health, and trauma issues – over 17 percent (nearly 92,000 students)

- In almost all measures on this survey, the 10 [Opportunity Districts](#) reflect the greatest challenges with participation, and evidence disproportionately greater need in the areas of devices, connectivity, and family, health, trauma issues.
 - Nearly 27 percent of the students in these districts are receiving distance learning through offline methods, as compared to only 9 percent in the remaining 23 [Alliance Districts](#) and 9.3 percent statewide.
 - Only around 48 percent of students in these 10 districts are participating fully in the distance learning program as compared to over 75 percent in the remaining 23 Alliance Districts and over 74 percent statewide.
 - Though these 10 districts enroll about 20 percent of the total student population statewide, they account for 44 percent of all students statewide needing devices, 35 percent of all students statewide needing internet access in the home, and 37 percent of all students statewide experiencing family, health, and/or trauma issues.
- Strategies deemed effective by the districts include individual contact with students and families, delivering of technology and technological support, case management and individual/family interventions, engagement of students through fun social activities, live lessons and interactions with teachers, and the use of learning management programs.
- The greatest challenge to getting fuller participation in distance learning was the ongoing challenge faced by parents/guardians who may be working full time, feeling overwhelmed, or dealing with food/income security issues to support their child with school work. In some cases, there were challenges in actually making contact with some families. Other challenges included working with at-risk students, technology access (both devices and connectivity), supporting special education and English learners, materials and professional learning, specials including arts and physical education, and managing the specialized circumstances facing younger and older students.
- Specific supports desired from the State of Connecticut to increase student participation include technology, state guidance on a variety of topics including distance learning standards and school reopening, curriculum and professional learning resources, and supports for families.

Over the next couple of months, the CSDE will be working actively with districts, the Governor's Office, and philanthropists to bring a variety of resources to the table.

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Student Participation in Distance Learning:

*Device/Connectivity Needs, Effective Strategies,
Challenges, and State Supports Needed*

Results from a District Survey Conducted on Behalf of the Learn from Home Task Force



June 2020

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Executive Summary

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- The greatest challenge to getting fuller participation in distance learning was the ongoing challenge faced by parents/guardians who may be working full time, feeling overwhelmed, or dealing with food/income security issues to support their child with school work. In some cases, there were challenges in actually making contact with some families. Other challenges included working with at-risk students, technology access (both devices and connectivity), supporting special education and English learners, materials and professional learning, specials including arts and physical education, and managing the specialized circumstances facing younger and older students.
- Specific supports desired from the State of Connecticut to increase student participation include technology, state guidance on a variety of topics including distance learning standards and school reopening, curriculum and professional learning resources, and supports for families.

Introduction

When in-person classes in all public schools were cancelled on March 17, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, instruction full-time shifted to remote learning from home. Governor Lamont and Education Commissioner Cardona established the [Learn from Home Task Force \(LHTF\)](#) to lead the effort to ensure every student has access to high-quality learning content at home. The LHTF's first task was to lead the safe, efficient and timely distribution of two recent philanthropic donations intended to advance equitable access and support continuity of education at home, including the gift of up to 60,000 laptops to high school students by the [Partnership for Connecticut](#) as well as more than 185,000 high-quality, Scholastic book packs by the Nooyi Family for PK-8 grade students. The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) also made available numerous [digital learning resources](#) for integration by districts into their programs; in addition, the CSDE hosted a [multi-part webinar series](#) that showcased how a range of Connecticut districts had implemented teaching and learning at a distance. Key topics such as student engagement, balancing asynchronous and synchronous learning, online teaching practices, professional learning, rigorous content, formative assessment, special populations, socioemotional support, connectivity, and security were discussed.

As the 2019-20 school year draws to a close, the LHTF and the CSDE are interested in getting high-level answers to following three essential questions:

1. What approaches to distance learning (i.e., online learning versus other methods such as printed learning materials/packets, 1:1 phone calls, wellness checks) were being employed by districts to continue delivering educational opportunities to students?
2. To what extent did students participate in the distance learning programs offered by their district?
3. To what extent did students' access to devices in the home, access to the internet, and/or other family, health, or trauma issues become critical barriers to greater participation in distance learning?

Data Collection

The CSDE designed a simple survey to gather district-level estimates on the above three questions. In addition to the quantitative estimates, open ended questions sought district perspectives on effective strategies to increase student participation, the most challenging areas for getting fuller student participation, and the specific supports the State of Connecticut can provide to increase student participation. The survey was sent to all local and regional school superintendents, public charter school directors, headmasters of endowed

academies, executive directors of regional education service centers (RESCs), and the state school districts including the CT Technical Education and Career System, Unified School District #1 and #2.

Survey responses were received from 170 (84.6 percent) of 201 potential school districts (see Table 1). These 170 districts enrolled 489,403 students based on the October 1, 2019 student enrollment count; this represents 92.7 percent of the total statewide student population of 527,829. Of the 228,357 students statewide who are eligible for free- or reduced-price meals – a common proxy measure for socio-economic status – an even greater percentage (95.3 percent) were enrolled in districts that responded to the survey.

Table 1: District Representation in the Survey Responses Received

District Type	Districts			All Students			Free- or Reduced-Price Meal Eligible Students		
	Total # Respond-ed	State Total	Percent Respond-ed	Total # Respond-ed	State Total	Percent Respond-ed	Total # Respond-ed	State Total	Percent Respond-ed
Alliance: Opportunity Districts	10	10	100.0%	106,776	106,776	100.0%	77,596	77,596	100.0%
Alliance: Non-Opportunity Districts	23	23	100.0%	113,417	113,417	100.0%	66,452	66,452	100.0%
All Other Local/Regional and Endowed Academies	113	136	83.1%	238,219	270,966	87.9%	54,223	61,202	88.6%
RESCs, Public Charters, State Districts incl. CTECS	24	32	75.0%	30,991	36,670	84.5%	19,450	23,107	84.2%
Total	170	201	84.6%	489,403	527,829	92.7%	217,721	228,357	95.3%

All 33 Alliance Districts¹ (which includes the 10 Opportunity Districts²) responded to this survey. To further evaluate the representativeness of the responses received, non-Alliance districts were grouped into two categories based on the prevalence of free- or reduced-price meals (FRPM) populations in those districts:

1. Non-Alliance local school districts (23%), Regional School Districts (17%) and Endowed Academies (36%)
2. Public Charter Schools (70%), RESCs (61%), and state districts including CTECS (59%)

¹ The [Alliance District program](#) is a unique and targeted investment in Connecticut's 33 lowest-performing districts. Connecticut General Statue Section 10-262u establishes a process for identifying Alliance Districts and allocating increased Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding. The additional funds and the technical support provided to these districts by the CSDE are designed to support district strategies to dramatically increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps by pursuing bold and innovative reforms.

² [Opportunity Districts](#) are the 10 lowest performing districts statewide identified pursuant to C.G.S. 10-262u.

The data in Table 1 reveal that among all other local/regional districts + Endowed Academies, and among Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), public charter districts, and state districts including CTECS, nearly 85 to 90 percent of all students and a similar percentage of FRPM eligible students were enrolled in districts that responded to the survey.

Therefore, considering the extent of participation in the survey, both overall and within specific district types, the data from this survey can be considered as representative of the entire statewide population. It can be used for reasonably estimating the statewide rates of student participation in distance learning and the need for devices and internet connectivity to increase the level of participation.

Results

A cautionary note: in reviewing the results below, it is extremely important to remember that due to the unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educators have had to stand up new infrastructure for full-time distance learning, solve a wide array of device/connectivity issues, design and provide engaging instruction to students, support the professional learning of their teachers, and establish mechanisms for follow up with disengaged students and families.

To minimize the data collection burden on districts at this critical juncture, while being able to gather data that allows us to draw inferences about the state as whole, the CSDE asked districts to provide *estimates* of percentages of students with respect to their approach to participation distance learning, the extent of their participation in distance learning, and their need for devices/connectivity to enhance their participation in distance learning.

Therefore, the data collected from this survey are aggregate estimates that can support valid inferences at a statewide or district type level; they are not derived from precise counts of student-level data and as such are not suitable for other granular analyses.

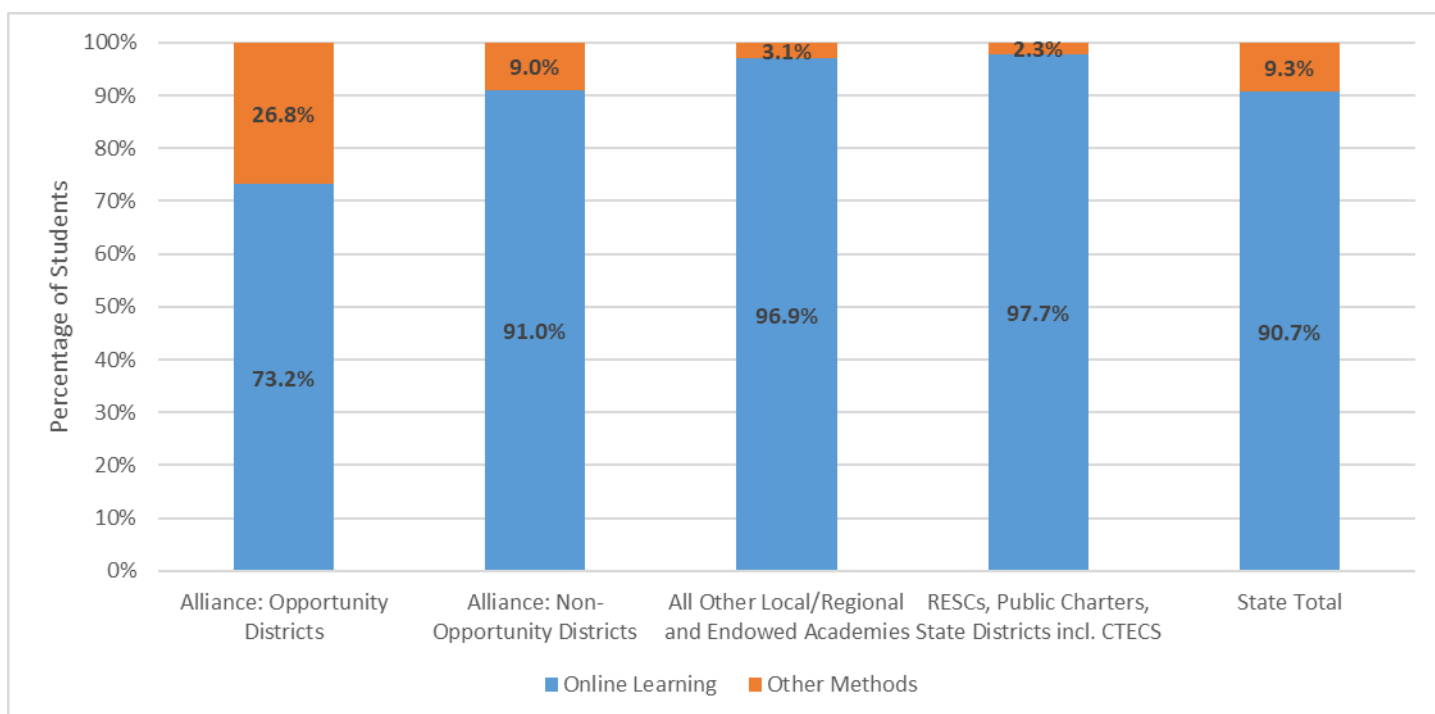
The three questions outlined in the opening section will be addressed in sequence below. This will be followed by the results of a qualitative analysis of district responses to the three open-ended questions on effective strategies to increase student participation, the most challenging areas for getting fuller student participation, and the specific supports the State of Connecticut can provide to increase student participation.

Approach to Distance Learning

What approaches to distance learning (i.e., online learning versus other methods such as printed learning materials/packets, 1:1 phone calls, wellness checks) were being employed by districts to continue delivering educational opportunities to students?

Statewide, over 90% of students who participated in distance learning after class cancellations due to COVID-19 participated through technology-based online learning while fewer than 10 percent participated through other methods including printed learning materials/packets, 1:1 phone calls and wellness checks. This percentage was dramatically different for the Opportunity Districts (see figure 1) where substantially fewer (i.e. 73.2 percent) participated through online learning. A closer look revealed that in six of the smaller Opportunity Districts (Derby, East Hartford, East Haven, New Britain, New London, and Norwich), almost all students (greater than 95 percent) participated in distance learning through the online learning method while the rates were substantially lower in the four largest districts (Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury).

Figure 1: Approaches to Student Participation in Distance Learning by District Type



Extent of Student Participation

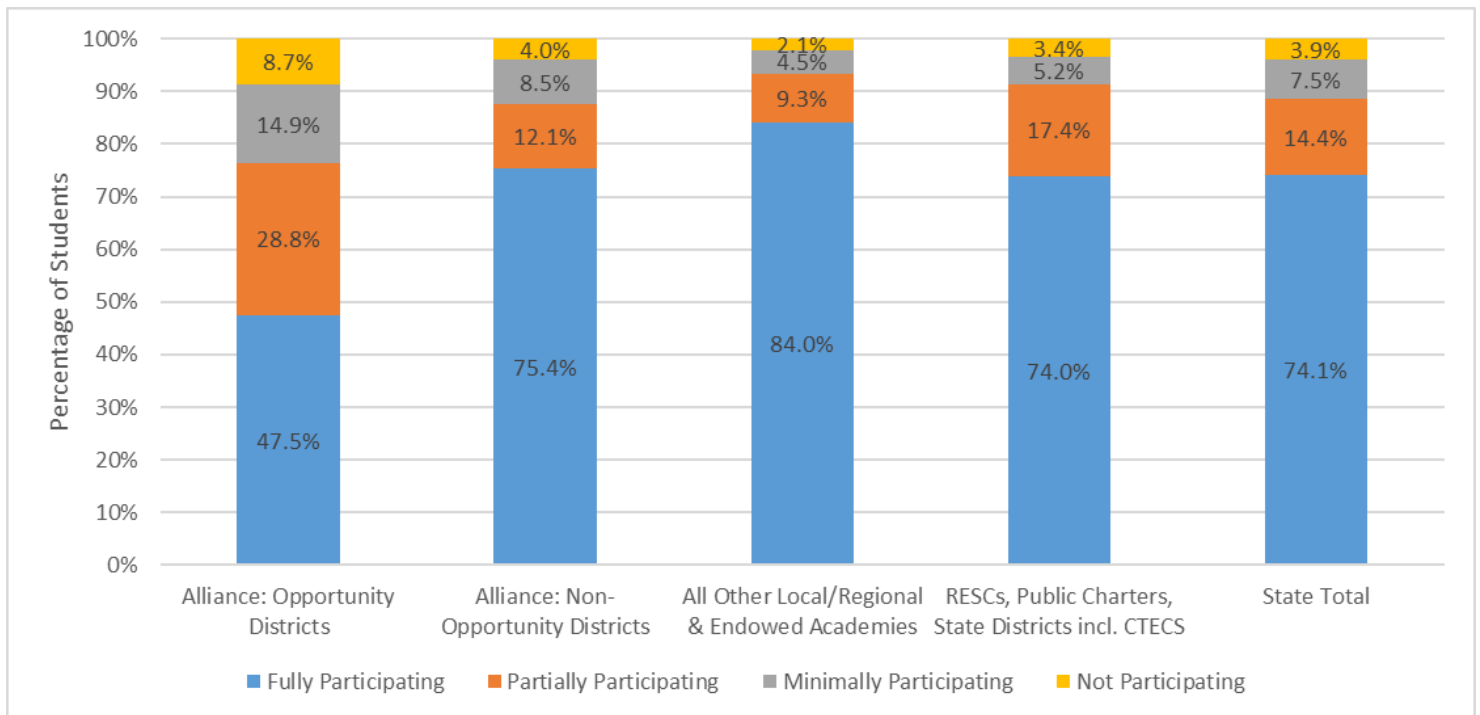
To what extent did students participate in the distance learning programs offered by their district?

Districts were asked to indicate the percentage of students who were:

- Fully participating (e.g., completes assignments on a weekly basis and/or participates in synchronous learning sessions; communicates with teachers regularly);
- Partially participating (e.g., connected several times after in-person class cancellations but may go for more than a week without any contact; may have completed some work but is falling behind);
- Minimally participating (e.g., has connected just a few times after in-person class cancellations; has completed very little or no work since mid-March); or
- Not participating (i.e., has not connected at all after in-person class cancellations in mid-March)

Statewide, over 74 percent of all students (approximately 391,000 students) are fully participating in the distance learning offerings of the district. Another 14 percent (approximately 76,000 students) are partially participating, 8 percent are minimally participating (approximately 40,000 students), and 4 percent have not participated (approximately 21,000 students).

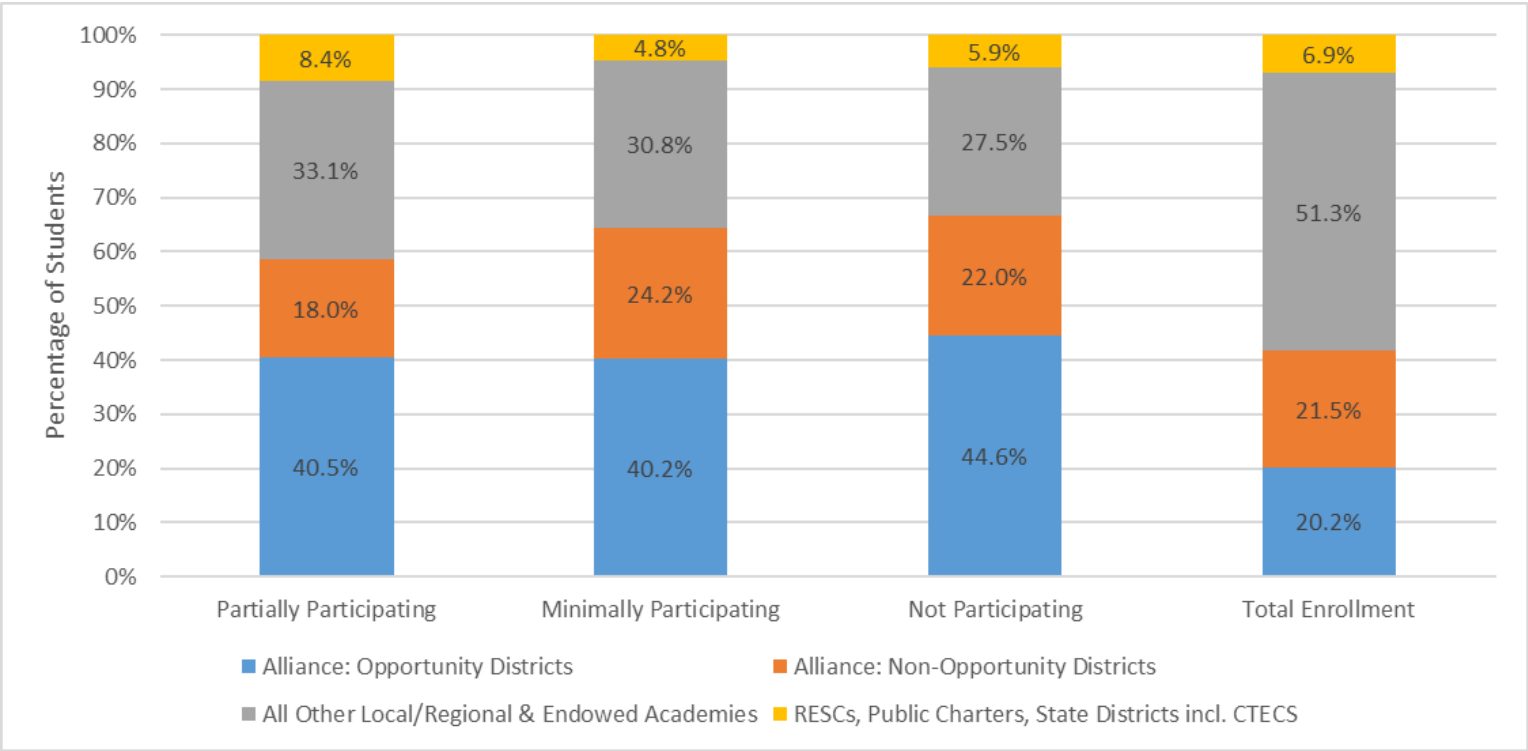
Figure 2: Extent of Student Participation in Distance Learning by District Type



The percentage of students in the 10 [Opportunity Districts](#) who are fully participating is substantially lower than that of the state as whole; while statewide over 74 percent are fully participating, among these 10 opportunity districts, only around 48 percent of students are fully participating.

Likewise, the students who were participating less than fully (i.e., partial, minimal, not participating) are over-represented in the 10 Opportunity Districts. Though these 10 districts serve about 20 percent all students, they account for around 40 percent of partially (approximately 31,000 students) and minimally participating students (approximately 16,000 students), and nearly 45 percent of all students who are not participating (approximately 9,300 students) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Distribution of Partially Participating, Minimally Participating and Not Participating students by District Type



Among the 23 other Alliance (non-opportunity) districts and among RESCs, public charters, and state districts including CTECS, there was no similar, obvious disproportionality; the proportion of students in the partial, minimal, or not participating groups from these district types were somewhat similar to their proportion of the total student enrollment. Among the “all other local/regional districts and the endowed academies” group, contrary to the 10 Opportunity Districts, the proportion of students in the partial, minimal, or not participating groups were substantially lower than their proportion of the total student enrollment.

Barriers to Participation: Devices Internet Access, and Family, Health, Trauma Issues

To what extent did students' access to devices in the home, access to the internet, and/or other family, health, or trauma issues become critical barriers to greater participation in distance learning?

Overall, it is estimated that for nearly 10 percent of students in Connecticut (around 50,000 students), **access to a device** in the home – because there is no computer/laptop/tablet in the home (or) that any available devices are shared among many family members – is a barrier to greater participation in distance learning (see Table 2).

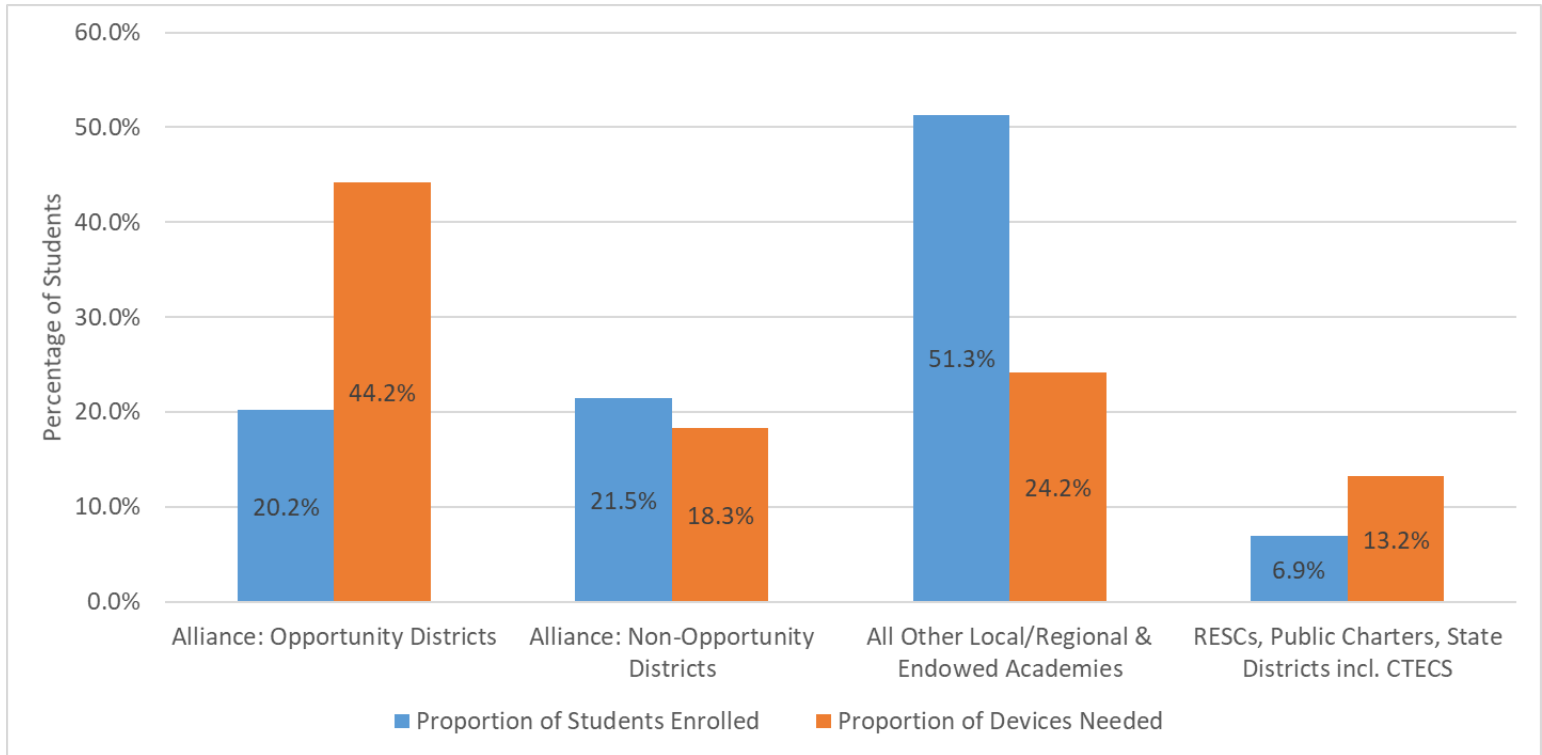
Table 2: Devices Needed by District Type

District Type	Number of Students	Proportion of Students	Number of Devices Needed	Proportion of Devices Needed
Alliance: Opportunity Districts	106,776	20.2%	22,088	44.2%
Alliance: Non-Opportunity Districts	113,417	21.5%	9,142	18.3%
All Other Local/Regional & Endowed Academies	270,966	51.3%	12,090	24.2%
RESCs, Public Charters, State Districts incl. CTECS	36,670	6.9%	6,597	13.2%
State Total	527,829	100.0%	49,917	100.0%

The need for devices is disproportionately greatest in the 10 Opportunity Districts (see Figure 4); though these 10 districts enroll about 20 percent of all students statewide, they indicate need for over 44 percent of all devices. The need is also great in RESCs, public charters, and state districts including CTECS. These districts offer choice programs that serve students who are residents of the Opportunity Districts. While they enroll approximately seven percent of all students statewide, they evidence need for approximately 13 percent of all devices.

On the contrary, all other local/regional school districts and the endowed academies enroll over 50 percent of all students statewide, but only account for less than 25 percent of the devices needed. Among the 23 non-opportunity Alliance districts, their need for devices is somewhat commensurate to their enrollment; these districts enroll approximately 22 percent of all students, and are accounting for approximately 18 percent of all devices needed (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The Proportion of Devices Needed, Relative to the Total Proportion of Enrollment



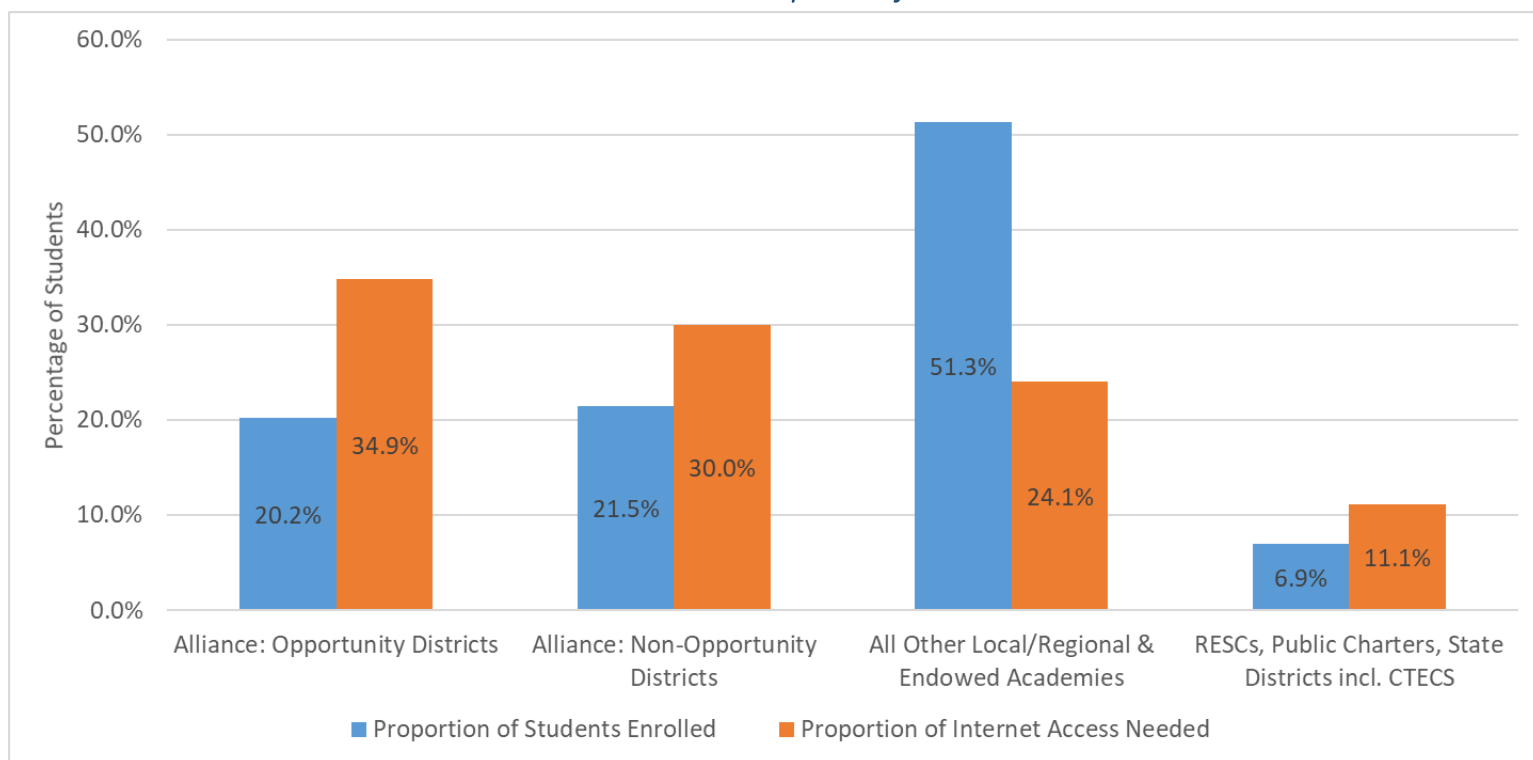
In terms of **internet access**, it is estimated that for nearly six percent of students in Connecticut (over 29,000 students), internet access in the home – for example there is no internet access, or internet access is not high speed, or it is limited to a phone and not suitable for use with a computer/tablet – is a barrier to greater participation in distance learning (see Table 3).

Table 3: Internet Access Needed by District Type

District Type	Number of Students	Proportion of Students	Number of Students Needing Internet Access	Proportion of Internet Access Needed
Alliance: Opportunity Districts	106,776	20.2%	10,133	34.9%
Alliance: Non-Opportunity Districts	113,417	21.5%	8,709	30.0%
All Other Local/Regional & Endowed Academies	270,966	51.3%	6,998	24.1%
RESCs, Public Charters, State Districts incl. CTECS	36,670	6.9%	3,230	11.1%
State Total	527,829	100.0%	29,070	100.0%

The need for internet access in the home is relatively greater than their share of enrollment in all district types except among the “all other local/regional school districts and endowed academies” group. This group of districts enroll over 50 percent of all students statewide, but only account for less than 25 percent of the students needing internet access (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: The Proportion of Students Needing Internet Access Relative to the Total Proportion of Enrollment



On the contrary, the 10 Opportunity Districts (see Figure 5) account for 20 percent of all students statewide, but approximately 35 percent of all students with inadequate or no internet access. Similarly a disproportionately higher need for internet access is noted in the remaining 23 non-opportunity Alliance districts, and the RESCs, public charters, and state districts including CTECS.

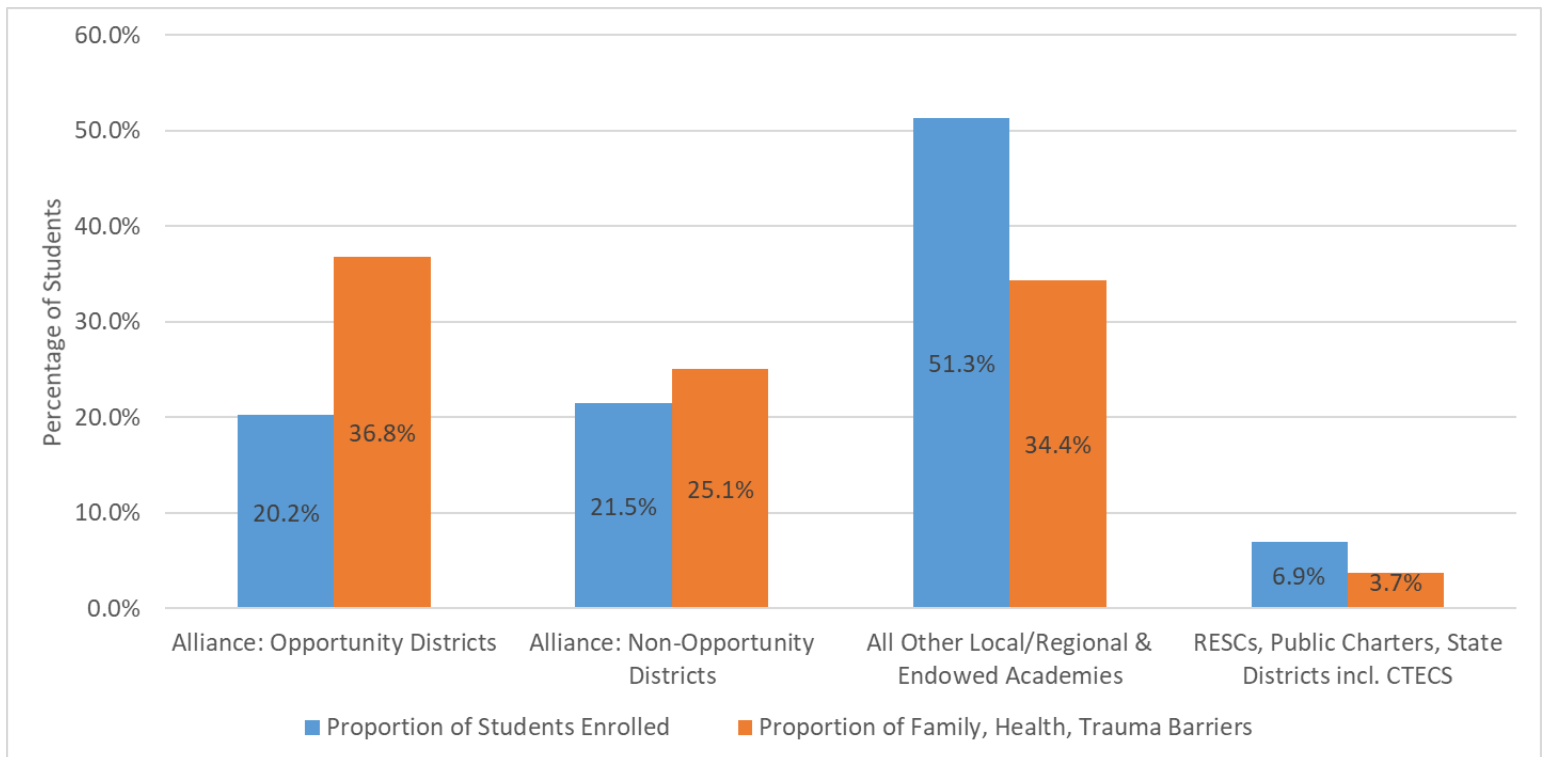
In terms of family, health, or trauma issues, it is estimated that over 17 percent of all students (nearly 92,000 students) are experiencing such issues (e.g., student/family health; need to care for sibling; inadequate space in the home; trauma) and it is a barrier to their greater participation in distance learning (see Table 4).

Table 4: Family, Health, Trauma Barriers by District Type

District Type	Number of Students	Proportion of Students	Number of Students Facing Family, Health, Trauma Barriers	Proportion of Family, Health, Trauma Barriers
Alliance: Opportunity Districts	106,776	20.2%	33,806	36.8%
Alliance: Non-Opportunity Districts	113,417	21.5%	22,990	25.1%
All Other Local/Regional & Endowed Academies	270,966	51.3%	31,536	34.4%
RESCs, Public Charters, State Districts incl. CTECS	36,670	6.9%	3,418	3.7%
State Total	527,829	100.0%	91,750	100.0%

The prevalence of family, health, and trauma issues is disproportionately greatest in the 10 Opportunity Districts (see Figure 6); though these 10 districts enroll about 20 percent of all students statewide, they account for more than 36 of all students experiencing these issues. Among the 23 non-opportunity Alliance districts, such disproportionality is not evidenced. In the other two district types, the prevalence of such issues is proportionally lower than enrollment (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: The Proportion of Students Experiencing Family, Health, Trauma Relative to the Total Proportion of Enrollment



Effective District Strategies

In addition to quantitative estimates of student participation in distance learning, the survey also asked three open ended questions regarding effective strategies, challenges, and supports desired. The survey responses were categorized into themes, and the number of responses related to each theme were tallied.

What specific strategies taken by the district's educators have been most effective in increasing student participation in distance learning?

In order of most prevalent to least, the six themes identified include:

1. Individual contact of students and families (111 responses)

The most common theme by far was that individual contact of students and families was essential to increasing student participation. This contact was done through phone calls, video conferencing, email, google meets and other venues. Some districts performed home visits or wellness checks on students. Various school personnel participated in making contact; paraprofessionals, teachers, administrators, counselors and even nurses were engaged in checking on families. Though some districts reported mass communication strategies through online announcements and newsletters, the direct one-to-one communication with students and parents, to determine family needs was a consistent theme for driving engagement.

2. Delivery of technology and technological support (63 responses)

Many districts mentioned distributing technology. This included devices such as Chromebooks or iPads. However, some families needed wireless hotspots. Some districts also provided tech support to their families. One response noted, "The district issued Chromebooks to students who did not have access to technology in the home or had insufficient access in the home because of multiple family members requiring access to Chromebooks. We also provide IT services to repair any district device that encounters functionality issues. We identified any family that did not have internet access and we are providing mobile hotspots for those families to ensure internet access." A couple of districts mentioned providing technology to teachers as well.

3. Case management and individual / family interventions (45 responses)

The theme of case management and individual / family interventions included a wide range of practices employed by districts in Connecticut. Some districts had teams dedicated to analyzing data and monitoring attendance and engagement. Others had one point person. Interventions included

using paraprofessionals to provide 1-1 support for students with IEPs, English learners, or students who were identified as unengaged by the team. Other districts identified families that needed food or other community supports and connected those families with those supports. Below are excerpts of select comments:

- “Partnering with community agencies to develop webs of support”
- “Translation of communications into multiple languages”
- “An assigned para or counselor to spend the day online working with a student task by task”
- “We have set up SRBI teams in each of the buildings to identify students that are not engaging in learning. This team has set up support systems for families and have been problem solving to get as many students participating as possible.”
- “Wellness Plan directed by clinicians, including individual and small group counseling sessions, regular participation from paraprofessionals with those students who are more disengaged.”

4. Engagement of students through fun social activities (32 responses)

Many schools have engaged students through fun social or community building activities. These included “School-wide videos, Morning Broadcasts, Gratitude wall, May the 4th be with you video challenge, sunflower project, Facebook story telling every night”.” Other districts strove to “foster a culture of student engagement.” Some used advisory check-ins in the morning and check outs in the afternoon. One district reported giving “encouragement and support from a variety of staff.” Another created “a non-academic class for students to voice concerns, share feedback and celebrate victories, challenges, celebrity announcements and contents.” Some teachers have visited student homes to place lawn signs or drop off goodie bags.

5. Live lessons and interactions with teachers (26 responses)

Some schools have found increased engagement when students engage in live sessions with their teachers and peers. This instruction may be for presenting new learning at the beginning of a week or in the form of flexible office hours. Some live meetings were for the entire class while others were for small groups or individuals. Some video conferencing was held with parents as well as students. Some schools noted that a combination of live and asynchronous learning worked well for them.

6. The use of learning management programs (22 responses)

Twenty-two districts noted that they used learning management systems. These included Seesaw, Google, Zoom, Schoology and Microsoft 365/Microsoft TEAMS, Remind, Dojo, Facebook, Khan Academy, Boom, Learn Zillion, Zearn, Lexia and IXL. Schools that had already been using a learning management system reported that this eased the transition. “In addition to the technology we also have experience with learning management systems, namely Schoology and Google Classroom. Because so many teachers were already familiar with this technology, they were able to support their colleagues.” “Use of google classroom suite for many more years than the time of closure. Grades 5-12 were already working with personal 1:1 school issued devices. Both synchronous and asynchronous lessons and many sessions of PD for certified and uncertified staff on use of google suite in prior years. We were very fortunate.”

Other thoughts that occurred fewer than 20 times included being flexible to meet the needs of families, surveying families and using their feedback, providing professional development for teachers and having engaging content for students.

Challenges

The next open-ended question pertained to challenges. The question asked:

Briefly describe the area(s) where getting fuller student participation in distance learning has been the most challenging and why.

The survey responses were categorized into themes, and the number of responses related to each theme were tallied. In order of most prevalent to least, the following eight themes are presented:

1. Home Context (82)

The most common theme was that the home context was a barrier to greater student participation in distance learning. Commonly cited issues included:

a. Actually making contact with some families:

- “Reaching our families that are homeless”
- “difficulty contacting some students due to nonworking phone numbers or temporary relocation”

- “some administrators and teachers think that some families moved or left the area... Reaching some families who did not respond to phone calls.”

b. Home support system

- “Some students do not have the same parental support or home environments that can create the structure needed for successful home-based online learning”
- “Students with parents working full time have been more likely to not engage fully with their distance learning”
- “Parents will refuse to communicate needs, or refuse to reach out of school staff. Parents who are not able, and this is not a judgement, to motivate their students.”

c. Parent refusal

- “There are some parents who have taken the position that their child does not learn via the strategies offered and have decided not to participate at all.”
- “Parents pulling kids out because they are overburdened.”

d. Trauma or instability in the home

- “Parents who are overwhelmed by family responsibilities”
- “Students with family social emotional instability”
- “families facing trauma or illness that are trying to cope with a crisis”
- “Income and food insecurity were issues for many of our families prior to the pandemic and have been magnified during these times.
- “Students who may not be living in town, students whose family situation has changed, new students to the district.”

2. At-risk Students including English Learners (41)

Many districts reported that students who were disengaged prior to the pandemic have been more difficult to engage during the pandemic. Two districts reported some increase in engagement from a small number of previously disengaged students.

- a. “In the cases where students are not participating as fully, it is usually in content areas where the student struggled when instruction was delivered in-person.”
- b. “Although there are exceptions to this, students who lacked motivation and involvement before at-home distance learning are not super-participants now.”
- c. “Family crisis is always challenging, but more so when students can not be in school as a stabilizing influence”
- d. “Students with serious mental health needs are the biggest struggle; our support services staff still provides counseling and services but sometimes getting these students to engage is difficult.”
- e. “Where there have been poor relations to begin with, such as DCF involvement due to referrals made by school staff, families have been less responsive.”

3. Technology (35)

Technology was another commonly cited barrier. Issues ranged from having internet access to additional devices. Some districts reported issues with students needing to share a device which was less than ideal. Other districts reported issues with helping parents use the online learning systems.

4. Materials and procedures for distance learning (35)

Materials and procedures for distance learning was a broad theme that encompassed several smaller themes including

- a. Need for professional development or best practices surrounding online learning
 - i. It is difficult to know how much student work is the right amount, how rigorous to make the activities and expectations”
 - ii. “appropriate instructional strategies for online learning (Great need for professional learning)”
- b. Computer fatigue or students not liking online learning
 - i. “Challenge has been the change in the weather and screen time burnout”

- ii. “We have also heard that tasks need to be more hands on and appropriate to the home environment with a lot of requests for outdoor learning”
 - iii. “Some students do not like participating in live class sessions. They don’t participate and try to hide themselves at times.”
 - iv. “Some families do not have internet access and the district did not have enough devices for a true 1:1 causing us to develop weekly packets for about 5% of our students with learning activities. This is more challenging to give feedback on student performance and a large amount of resources and hours are required for this endeavor.
- c. Inappropriateness of online learning for certain subjects
- i. “Unlike traditional classes students in the trades do not have access to machinery/tools/software that is required to complete these tasks. Additionally the teacher may not have access to these resources from their remote location. There is only so much theory instruction that can be given.”
 - ii. “From a teaching a [sic] learning perspective, distance learning does not offer the opportunity for timely feedback; strong informal and formal assessment techniques; and student collaboration.”
- d. Scheduling conflicts
- i. “We have some families where both parents are in health care and working night shifts, so they must sleep when our school is in session and therefore depending on the age of the child we may not have participation.”
 - ii. “It is nearly impossible to have a normal daily timeframe with our families. I.e. our students day is no longer 8:30-3:30.”
 - iii. “Students needing individual attention causing paras and certified staff to have to connect outside of the class schedule. Parents needing to be helped along with students and having schedules that require contact after 4:00 PM”
- e. Grading in distance learning

- i. "From a teaching a [sic] learning perspective, distance learning does not offer the opportunity for timely feedback; strong informal and formal assessment techniques; and student collaboration."
- ii. "Students who calculated their end of year grade and realized that even if they got an F for the 4th quarter they will still pass the class. Our students are brutally honest that they are fine not doing anything 4th quarter and coming away with a C for the class"
- iii. "Option of pass/fail may has [sic] decreased motivation in some students."

5. Special Education (26)

The special needs of students receiving special education services was part of many responses. School districts noted that they were simply unable to provide the services at the same level that they did in person.

- a. "Meeting IEP goals and objectives for students with special needs is sometimes a challenge, due to the absence of face-to-face contact"
- b. "Some students with learning disabilities have difficulty navigating online platforms – log ins, passwords etc."
- c. "Students with disabilities are struggling without in-person support."
- d. "High needs special education students – difficult to do remotely"
- e. "We have tried to implement all levels of service including tier 1 instruction, special education services, counseling services, intervention services, etc. It can be hard for families to maintain all of the appointments and scheduled services."
- f. "Students with disabilities that would have had 1:1, or outside programs that work within the school are unable to continue."

6. Older Students (27)

Older students face challenges such as additional responsibilities (caring for younger students, working) and waning motivation. Some districts stated that they were having particular challenges with grade 8 students who were not developmentally ready to do independent learning.

- a. "At our secondary level there were actual reports that attendance had improved with online learning; unfortunately when it was announced that school would be back in session for the remainder o [sic] the year, there was an increase in disengagement."
- b. "we notice that many high school students are only engaging in courses that they prefer or need in order to graduate"
- c. "Older students do not thing [sic] this will affect their learning. Parents believe they are doing the work and are shocked when we make calls. It improves for a few days and then dips again."
- d. "Engaging students in early adolescence has proved to be somewhat of a challenge."
- e. "Older students taking care of younger students, or working (at grocery stores, fast food, etc.).

7. Young children (26)

Young children, especially in prek-1st grade pose special challenges to distance learning. Students struggle to work independently, and rely on support from older students or parents/caregivers.

- a. "K-1 students are developmentally challenged by the online platform."
- b. "The areas that have been most challenging have been in the youngest grades, where learners are dependent on parental support."
- c. "K-2 but especially K. Children are not independent enough to access learning on the SeeSaw app and almost all of our parents are working from home and managing the learning of more than one child."
- d. "Parents of our youngest students have communicated that due to their personal work schedules they can only provide their children with minimal support"

8. Arts and specials (18)

Arts and non-core classes also pose special challenges to distance learning. Families tend not to prioritize these subjects. These subjects also tend to be difficult to teach in a distance format.

- a. "It has been a struggle to get students to participate in all subjects. Science, Social studies, Art, Music, PE and World Languages seem to be most impacted.

- b. “Unified Arts: Parents have indicated that they are more focused on the core classes because of the academic nature of the classes. Because of the overwhelming nature of distance learning, parents have indicated they are focusing more on core classes.”
- c. “Participation in PE, music and art. Families and teachers have struggled to make these performance based content areas accessible.”

Supports Needed from State of Connecticut

The last open-ended question pertained to supports needed from the State of Connecticut. The question specifically asked:

What specific supports can the state of Connecticut provide that would be most helpful to the district to increase student participation?

The survey responses were categorized into themes, and the number of responses related to each theme were tallied. In order of most prevalent to least, the following six themes are presented:

1. Technology (66)

As with other questions, technology ranked high on the list of needs. While many districts report having devices, they still reported issues with internet access. Many “free” internet opportunities were not available to families with poor credit, or they may be expiring soon. Other devices are older and will need to be serviced or replaced if distance learning continues. Suggestions included using writing grants or using existing grant money, moved into this category. A couple of districts asked for internet platforms that they could use (discussed further in curriculum resources). A few districts asked for devices for teachers and paraprofessionals. One district noted that it would be good if every child had the same device so that curriculum could be developed for that device.

2. State Guidance (59)

- a. Many towns are looking for state guidance on procedures for synchronous, asynchronous and in person schooling:
 - i. “Clear guidance on opening requirements such as recommended models for returning students with the current restrictions outlined for summer school. AM/PM, Alternate days, Alternate weeks, etc...”

- ii. “Structure around student expectations attendance, student engagement policies. Difficult to work with labor groups when there are no guidelines to reference.”
 - iii. “Distance learning, masks, gloves, rotational days, thermoscans, etc.? Needs for extra custodial staff, bus monitors, busing, etc? We will problem solve the “how” just tell us the “what”.”
- b. There is a strong desire for this guidance to be timely.
 - i. “Finally, we would love notice of what next year will look like as early as possible. Whether it is construction projects, staffing decisions, procurement of necessary PPE and a variety of other considerations, being able to have months rather than weeks to plan.”
 - ii. “Increasing notification of shifts that impact re-opening plans is desired”
- c. There is also a need for the entire state to be on the same page regarding expectations for schooling:
 - i. “I feel we need a stronger message regarding participation in education during the school closure. I have students reporting to me that their siblings who attend other schools are being told that everyone will be earning full credit for this year even with little to no participation since the closure. We are telling students that credit will NOT be awarded without proper participation in their learning.”
 - ii. “SET A STATEWIDE EXPECTATION ON SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING. ”
 - iii. “On some level we understand why the state allows us to make some of our own decisions on things like ESY [(Extended School Year)] but it causes a lot of work because then we all have to call each other and see what everyone else is doing so that we are not an outlier. In other words, it may seem like allowing us to have flexibility is a good thing, but, we feel, that it leaves us vulnerable to scrutiny or even lawsuits if we don’t then all scramble to make sure we are doing the same thing. The state could alleviate some of that stress by making some decisions about that and not leaving that much flexibility. This is especially true of ESY. It has caused a lot of worry as we try to do the right thing. We take all of these decisions very seriously and we

always try to do the right thing for kids but, in this case, its really hard for all of us to be figuring that out on our own.”

d. Districts are looking for best practices.

i. “A mind shift is needed so maybe a statewide campaign highlighting successes in all our districts with online learning?”

ii. “Share best practice”.

iii. “Continue to share with districts models of digital learning lessons to increase student engagement.”

iv. “Guidance on how much instructional time is appropriate. Some parents think we are doing too much and others think it is not enough.”

3. Curriculum Resources / Professional Development (53)

Many districts asked for curriculum and professional development resources. Some want online resources that can be pushed out to families. Others want continued access to digital platforms that so far have been free. Several suggested purchasing digital resources at scale through the state. Some wanted resources specifically geared towards project based learning, younger children or the arts. There was also a request to vet the online resources that are listed so that districts and teachers do not have to wade through everything. Districts want professional development resources on how to use technology effectively, as well as attending to the emotional and social learning of students.

4. Supporting families (31)

Many districts recognize that families need to be supported. Seven districts noted the need for childcare for essential workers, including the teachers themselves. Some recognized the need for parent education – potentially in the evenings, to help parents understand both distance learning and learning in general. There is a wide need for social emotional support of the family and some districts are performing home visits or organizing social-distance tutoring that occurs in person. Some districts need more support in locating students that have not been connecting. Two districts noted a need for translations.

a. “The last support would target the families struggling the most. Families with student experiencing trauma, who have special needs, or have experienced an increase in anxiety need

social emotional supports. The state could work with agencies to better connect schools with resources to support families.”

- b. “While I realize this may not be possible for health reasons at this time by any of our community partners, in home support for families is needed. Much like we provide in person medical support, this may be the only way for a small percent of families to connect.”
- c. “as we work on blended learning plans for the fall, we are most concerned about how families will balance childcare if schools are having a rotated schedule. It is really imperative that we have a state wide recommendation and solution for how families will be able to navigate childcare.”
- d. “More EL support in terms of translations. We do the best we can but could use some support in this area. Could the state hire translators at this time that we would have free access to?”
- e. “We need more support in helping to locate students that are not participating, unable to participate- this could be through other organizations, or funding to support more in-district staff that can assist in helping locate students that have incorrect or disabled contact information.”
- f. “Parent support groups”

5. Legal Protections (15)

Legal protections and legal issues were mentioned in 15 places. Educators are worried about privacy issues and equity issues. Districts are concerned about negotiating with unions.

- a. “Please help us: 1. Negotiate with teachers’ unions as the individual MOAS will be costly to execute. We need a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction available to all students. 2. Provide relief from 180 day calendar (extend executive order) so that we can spend more time training staff in the use of technology and many other topics”
- b. “Help with getting CEA to agree to many more online sessions that are live and connecting kids to teachers-take away teacher fear in working with kids live in DL. Taking into consideration that we need to leverage all of our staff (despite certs) in a flexible way to keep kids connected and learning – that might mean that they are integrating art, pe, and supporting general education ‘differently and uniquely’ to reduce group sizes and maximizing face to face

instructional time. We need to have the state help us in prioritizing face to face groups without legal reference to inequity in access to education (if we have youngest students in more than other grades).

- c. “To increase personalized learning and to create a healthy level of confidence among staff, all school systems are in need of strong legal language that fully protects our teaching staff against parents, advocates and lawyers from videotaping live classes.”
- d. “Privacy guidelines regarding recording live online student sessions (in our case using Google Meet) for playback for absent students and student comprehension”
- e. “If we were able to support students with special education needs through a live Zoom (beyond 1:1), or in small groups, without having to worry about student privacy, we would be more successful. This does not mean we would be advertising which students are receiving services, but it may be noticeable by parents on a Zoom session which students were receiving more support.”
- f. “Continued data privacy flexibility with the use of tech resources currently available without individual contracts and financial support to continue use of free or reduced subscription rates.”
- g. “It is almost like I would like “permission” to have a flexible schedule. Staff are concerned that it will appear that they are not working enough if not “online” 6 or 7 hours a day. That is simply not going to be sustainable. They need many more hours (and flexible hours) to plan, differentiate, and make contact with students and parents.

6. Other

Many other needs were identified by the districts. Eleven districts asked for more funds to support the purchase of materials that they would not have otherwise needed. This could include technology, but districts also noted PPE and furniture that would allow for social distancing. Some districts requested funds for families for food and basic supplies. Nine districts asked for flexibility in some sense, whether it be freedom from accountability metrics, or release from the 180 day year. One comment suggested educational programming for young children looped on television. Another requested more planning time and help doing 1:1 outreach. One district noted the inequities between districts and asked for a comprehensive plan to address poverty and income inequality in Connecticut.

Conclusion

The data and district perspectives from this survey provide high-level estimates of student participation in distance learning along with need for devices and connectivity. The district perspectives provide rich insight into the effective strategies used to increase student participation, the key challenges faced, as well as the specific supports from the State of Connecticut that would be most beneficial to districts to improve student participation in distance learning.