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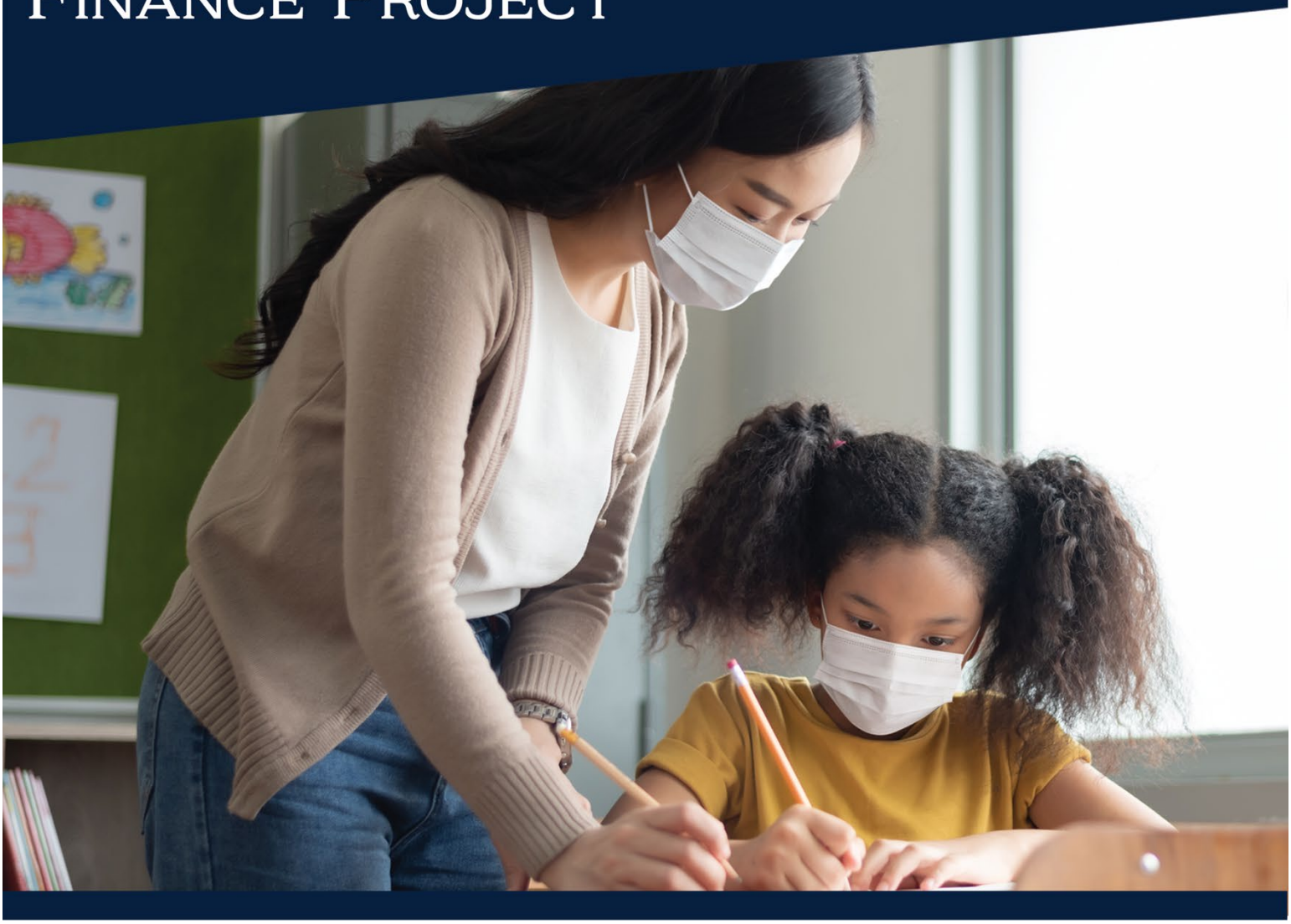

IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC: LEARNING MODELS & ATTENDANCE

How COVID-19 affected student learning and attendance rates for Connecticut districts, and the disparities it highlighted

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Contents

Key Findings

The following report and analysis contain a number of key findings about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning models and attendance rates among Connecticut's local and regional public school districts and charter schools. This section summarizes these findings and provides a quick glance at the report's biggest takeaways.

The type of learning model used by Connecticut's local and regional public school districts and charter schools varied depending on the wealth and need of the district. (pp. 12-13)

- Of the 187 districts observed, 39 districts reported less than seven weeks with most or all grades fully in-person, and 91 districts reported more than 18 weeks with most or all grades fully in-person. (p. 7)
- Districts that had more than 18 reported weeks with most or all grades fully in-person had an average equalized net grand list per capita of $194,642 — approximately $100,000 more than districts with less than seven reported weeks with most or all grades fully in-person. (pp. 7-8)
- Of all low-income students in Connecticut, 32 percent attend districts with less than seven reported weeks of mostly in-person instruction, while 27 percent attend districts with more than 18 reported weeks of mostly in-person instruction. (p. 8)

The attendance rate for all students attending a Connecticut local or regional public school or charter school decreased from the 2019-20 school year to the 2020-21 school year. However, attendance rates among Connecticut districts differed significantly. (p. 9)

- While some districts experienced a four percentage point increase in their attendance rate from the 2019-20 to the 2020-21 school year, others experienced a 15 percentage point decrease. (p. 9)
- Districts with an increase in their attendance rate spend an average of $19,030 per student, while districts with a decrease spend an average of $17,188 per student. This is approximately a $1,800 difference per student. (p. 9)
- Districts with an increase in their attendance rate spent about 75 percent of the reported weeks with most or all grades fully in-person, whereas districts with a decrease spent only 53 percent of reported weeks in-person. (p. 10)
- Of all low-income students in Connecticut, 13 percent attended a district that experienced an increase in their attendance rate. Districts with a decrease serve 87 percent of all low-income students. (p. 10)

Students attending a school in a higher-need, lower-wealth, and lower-spending district had less reported weeks of in-person instruction and lower attendance rates. (p. 11)

- Low-need districts spent roughly 11 more weeks with most or all grades fully in-person than Connecticut's high-need districts. (p. 11)
- The average attendance rate for high-need districts decreased by five percentage points from the 2019-20 to the 2020-21 school year. Lower-need districts experienced no change year-over-year. (p. 12)

- Districts with high property values and income wealth experienced no change year-over-year in their attendance rates, while lower-wealth districts had a decrease of about four percentage points. (p. 14)
- High-spending districts spent 82 percent of the reported weeks with in-person instruction, while low-spending districts spent only 59 percent — a 23 percentage point difference. (p. 14)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted how students are educated across Connecticut and the country. On March 15, 2020, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed an executive order directing all in-person instruction for public schools to be canceled from March 17, 2020 through March 31, 2020 in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.[1] The executive order was extended three times due to the continued spread of the virus and, eventually, all in-person classes for public schools were canceled for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year.[2] On June 25, 2020, however, the governor announced that due to Connecticut's successful containment efforts, districts would have the opportunity to offer in-school, full-time instruction for the 2020-21 school year.[3]

In order for districts to reopen for the 2020-21 academic year, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) outlined requirements and guidance for school districts to allow students the opportunity to access in-person instruction. The Department's guidance covered different aspects districts must include or consider in their plans for reopening, but districts still retained a high degree of discretion in their approaches, such as the type of instruction they would be providing their students and how to address student engagement.[4] This caused districts to pursue different learning models and report different attendance rates.

As a result of school districts serving different student populations with different needs, and having access to varying levels of resources, differences in the type of instruction students received, and the rate at which students attended school during the COVID-19 pandemic, varied greatly. This variation resulted in districts with higher student needs being impacted more than those with lower student needs. However, the inequities that exist among Connecticut's school districts are not new. Instead, a greater light has been shone on these inequities and disparities, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning models and attendance rates among Connecticut's local and regional public school districts and charter schools. Additionally, this report examines each district's student needs and the resources available to address changes and disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Learning Models

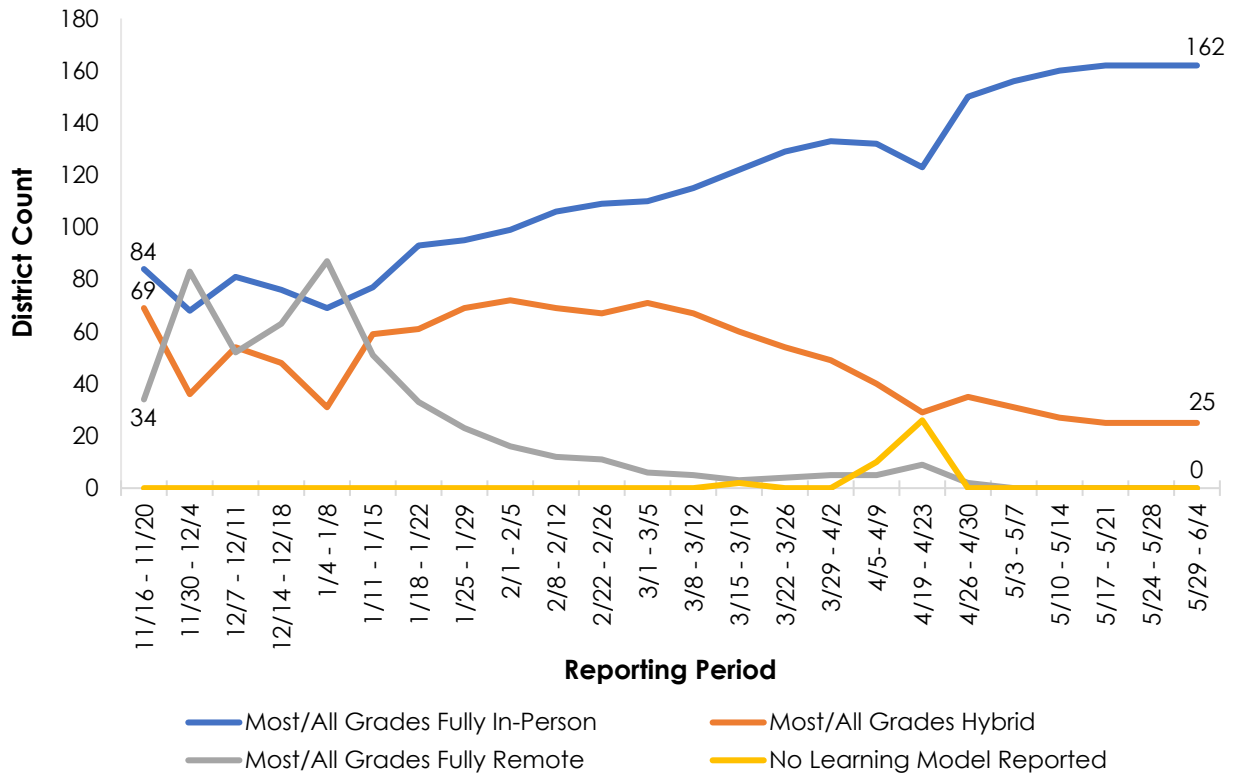
For the 2020-21 school year, the CSDE reported the learning model used by districts throughout the state on a weekly basis. In November 2020, the Department began reporting the predominant learning model type for each week and classifying the models into the following three groups:

- Most/All Grades Fully In-Person: More than 75 percent of the days in the reported week are in-person;
- Most/All Grades Hybrid: Between 25 percent and 75 percent of the days in the reported week are in-person; and
- Most/All Grades Fully Remote: Less than 25 percent of the days in the reported week are in-person.[5]

For this analysis, only 24 weeks where the predominant learning model was reported by the CSDE were observed.

For the 2020-21 school year, district leaders were given the authority to decide the learning model type. As Figure 1 below demonstrates, since November 2020, the number of districts offering fully in-person instruction to most or all grades steadily increased over the school year. In the last reported period, 87 percent of districts were offering in-person instruction.

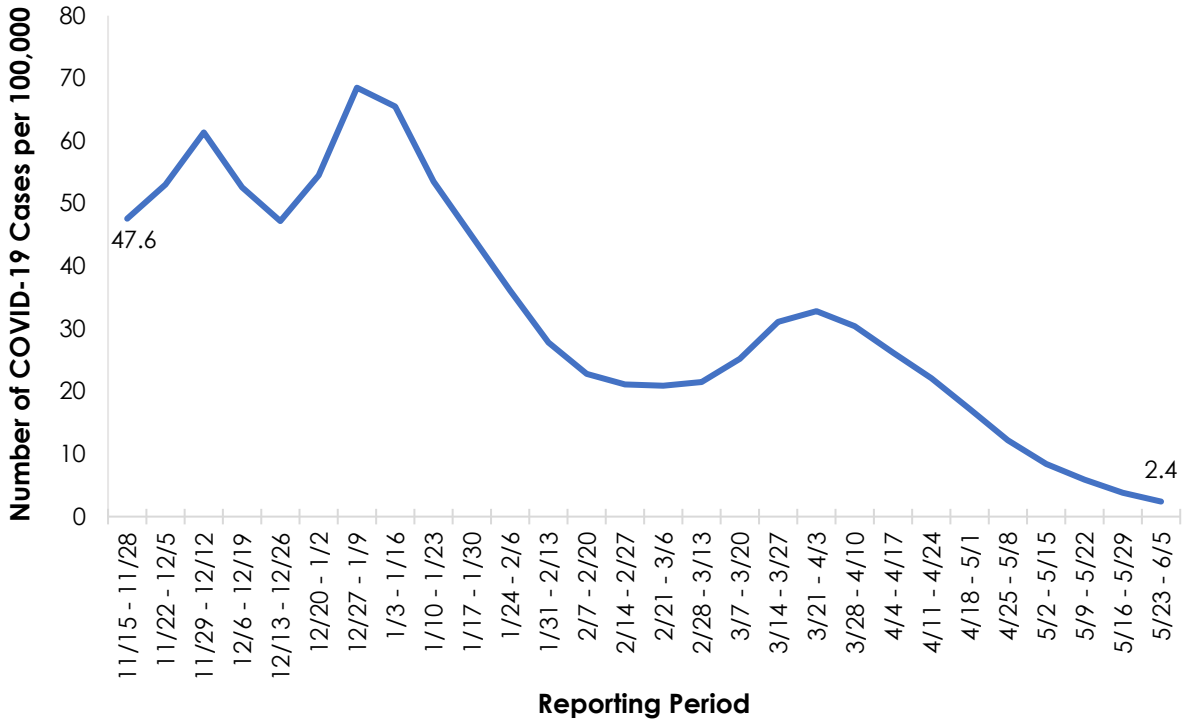
Figure 1: District Count by Learning Model Type for All Reported Periods[6]



In order to assist district leaders, the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) and the CSDE developed a set of metrics district leaders could follow to assist in the decision-making process on whether to provide in-person, hybrid, or remote learning. The key leading indicator, as recommended by the DPH and the CSDE, was the number of new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people per day (14-day average).[7]

Figure 2 below shows the number of new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people during the same timeframe as the reported periods for the learning models. The figure below suggests as the number of new COVID-19 cases decreased, the number of districts offering in-person instruction increased. Districts started offering more in-person instruction since the spread and prevalence of COVID-19 was lower.

Figure 2: Number of COVID-19 Cases per 100,000 for Reported Periods[8]



However, there is still a prevalent gap among districts in the type of learning model used throughout the school year. During the 24 reported periods, 39 districts reported less than seven weeks with most or all grades fully in-person. In contrast, 91 districts reported more than 18 weeks with most or all grades fully in-person.[9]

The type of instruction a district offered could be due to the resources available to the district, which is impacted by town wealth and available state and local funds. Districts that had more than 18 reported weeks with mostly in-person instruction had greater town wealth and spend more per student than districts with less than seven reported weeks of mostly in-person instruction. Table 1 details the average equalized net grand list per capita (ENGLPC), average district median household income (MHI), and average per-

student spending among districts that had less than six reported weeks with mostly in-person instruction and districts that had more than 18 reported weeks with mostly in-person instruction.

Table 1: District Wealth and Per-Student Spending by Instruction Type[10,11,12]

	Instruction Type		Difference	
District Wealth Factors	**More than 18 Weeks with Most/All Grades Fully In-Person**	**Less than Seven Weeks with Most/All Grades Fully In-Person**	**$**	**%**
Average ENGLPC	$194,642	$93,697	$100,945	107.7%
Average District MHI	$98,881	$69,518	$29,363	42.2%
Average Per-Student Spending[A]	$18,438	$16,503	$1,935	11.7%

Additionally, these districts differ in student demographics. Of all low-income students[B] in Connecticut, 32 percent attend districts with less than seven reported weeks of mostly in-person instruction, while 27 percent attend districts with more than 18 reported weeks of mostly in-person instruction.[13,14]

[A] For analysis in which per-student spending is used, charter schools have been excluded. Charters are not fiscally responsible for special education services and student transportation, and, as a result, are not fiscally comparable to local or regional public school districts.

[B] Low-income students are determined by whether the student qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL).

Attendance Rate

In addition to learning models, the CSDE reported the attendance rates, year-to-date, for Connecticut districts. Overall, the attendance rate for all Connecticut students attending a local or regional public school district or a charter school decreased by two percentage points from the 2019-20 school year to the 2020-21 school year.[15]

For the 187 districts analyzed, roughly 59 percent experienced a decrease in their attendance rate. However, the change in attendance rate varied significantly among the observed districts. Some districts experienced a four percentage point increase, while others experienced a 15 percentage point decrease.[16] The variation could be attributed to the resources available to these districts or the learning models utilized.

Districts with an increase in their attendance rate tended to have more wealth and spend more per student than districts with a decrease in their attendance rate. Table 2 below details the average ENGPLC, average district MHI, and average per-student spending among districts that had an increase or decrease in their attendance rate.

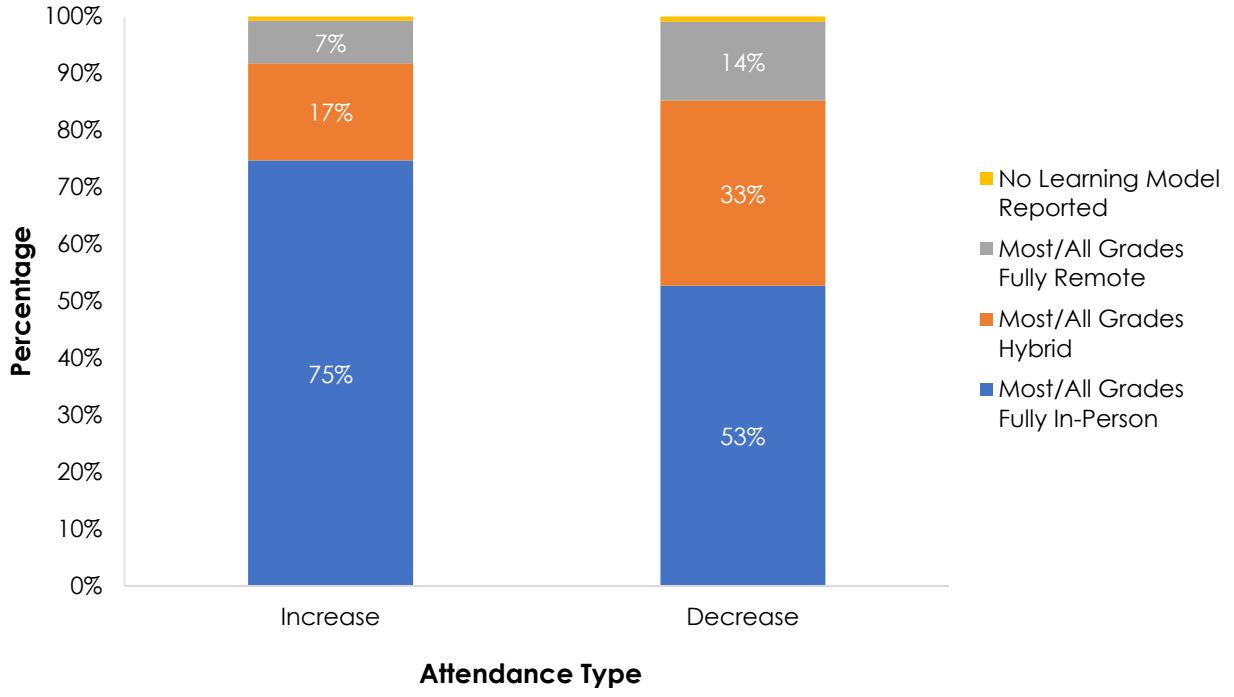
Table 2: District Wealth and Per-Student Spending by Attendance Type[17,18,19]

	Attendance Type		Difference	
District Wealth Factors	Increase in Attendance Rate	Decrease in Attendance Rate	$	%
Average ENGLPC	$181,197	$115,203	$65,994	57.3%
Average District MHI	$106,847	$76,746	$30,101	39.2%
Average Per-Student Spending[C]	$19,030	$17,188	$1,842	10.7%

Another contributing factor to the variation in attendance rates may be the instructional model chosen by districts. As Figure 3 demonstrates, districts with an increase in their attendance rates reported more weeks with most or all of their grades fully in-person than districts with a decrease.

[C] For analysis in which per-student spending is used, charter schools have been excluded. Charters are not fiscally responsible for special education services and student transportation, and, as a result, are not fiscally comparable to local or regional public school districts.

Figure 3: Percentage of Reported Weeks by Learning Model Type for Districts with an Increase or Decrease in Attendance[20,21]



Districts that had an increase in their attendance rates, year-over-year, also differ from districts that had a decrease in their attendance rates in terms of student need. Districts with an attendance rate increase serve 13 percent of all low-income students in Connecticut, while districts with an attendance rate decrease serve 87 percent of all low-income students.[22,23]

District Groups

In order to examine the differences in instruction type and attendance, Connecticut's local and regional public school districts and charter schools have been classified into different groups based on either district need, district wealth, or per-student spending. Each group consistently found that students attending school in a higher-need, lower-wealth, and lower-spending district had less reported weeks of in-person instruction and a lower attendance rate.

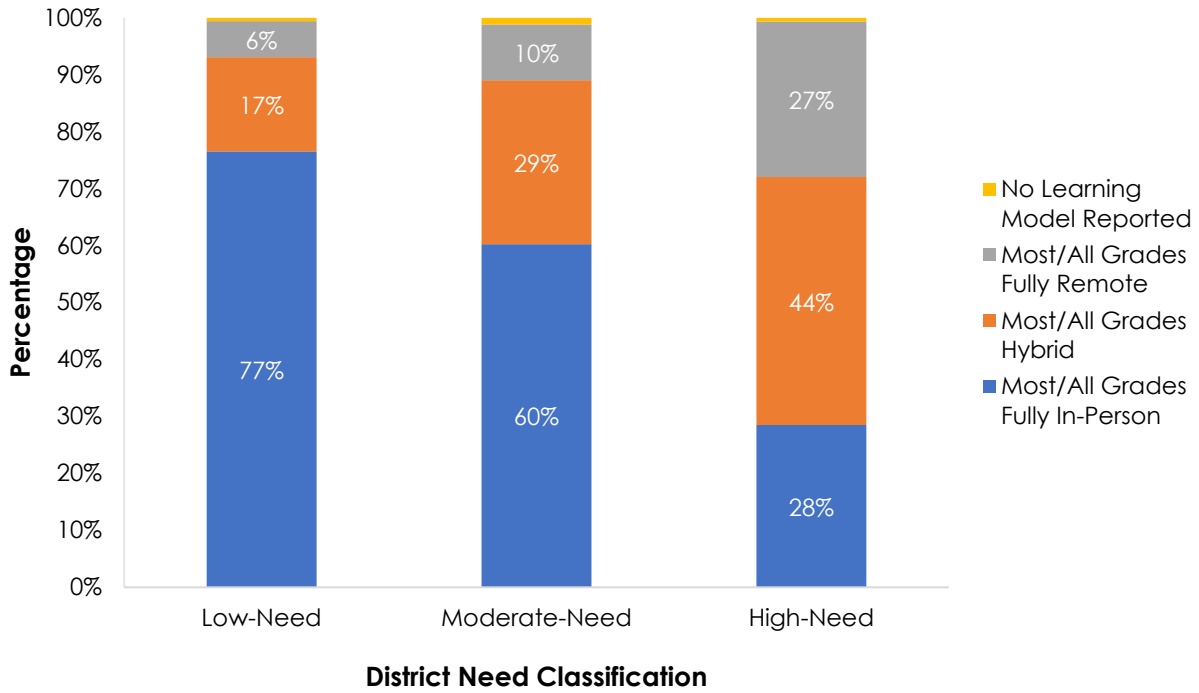
District Need

First, districts were grouped into three different classifications based on district need:

- Low-Need: Districts with less than 25 percent of enrolled students eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRPL);
- Moderate-Need: Districts with between 25 and 60 percent of enrolled students eligible for FRPL; and
- High-Need: Districts with more than 60 percent of enrolled students eligible for FRPL.

As shown in Figure 4 below, High-Need districts reported less weeks with fully in-person instruction than Low- and Moderate-Need districts. Low-Need districts spent 77 percent of the reported weeks with most or all grades fully-in person, while High-Need districts only had 28 percent of reported weeks with this instruction type. High-Need districts also spent a little less than half of the reported weeks with most or all grades with hybrid instruction.

Figure 4: Percentage of Reported Weeks by Learning Model Type for Each District Need Classification[24,25]



The average attendance rate among the different district types did not differ significantly for the 2019-20 academic year, but a dissimilarity among the groups was present for the 2020-21 school year. The average attendance rate for High-Need districts decreased year-over-year, while Low-Need districts had no change during the same timeframe. Table 3 below depicts the average attendance rate for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years by district need type.

Table 3: Average Attendance Rate Comparison for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 School Years by District Need Classification[26,27]

District Classification	2020-21 Average Attendance Rate	2019-20 Average Attendance Rate	Percentage Point Change
Low-Need	96%	96%	0%
Moderate-Need	93%	95%	-2%
High-Need	88%	93%	-5%

District Wealth

Additionally, districts were grouped into three different classifications based on district wealth:

- Low-Wealth: Districts in the first quartile of ENGLPC or MHI;
- Moderate-Wealth: Districts between the first and third quartiles of ENGLPC or MHI; and
- High-Wealth: Districts in the third quartile of ENGLPC or MHI.

Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate the significant differences in the type of learning model used among Low-, Moderate-, and High-Wealth districts. Moderate- and High-Wealth districts spent a larger portion of the reported weeks with most or all grades fully in-person. Low-Wealth districts spent more reported weeks with most or all grades fully remote or with hybrid instruction. This continues to reveal the inequities that exist among different types of districts, since districts with greater wealth are able to provide more in-person instruction.

Figure 5: Percentage of Reported Weeks by Learning Model Type for Each District Wealth Classification – ENGLPC[28,29]

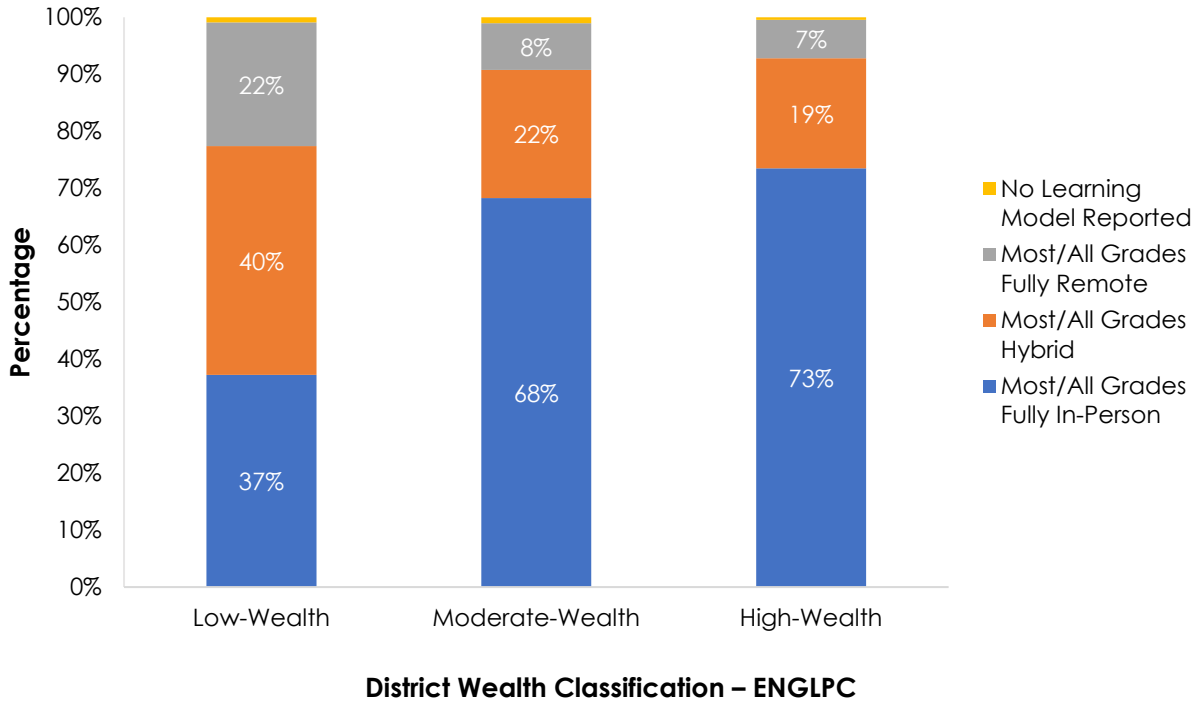
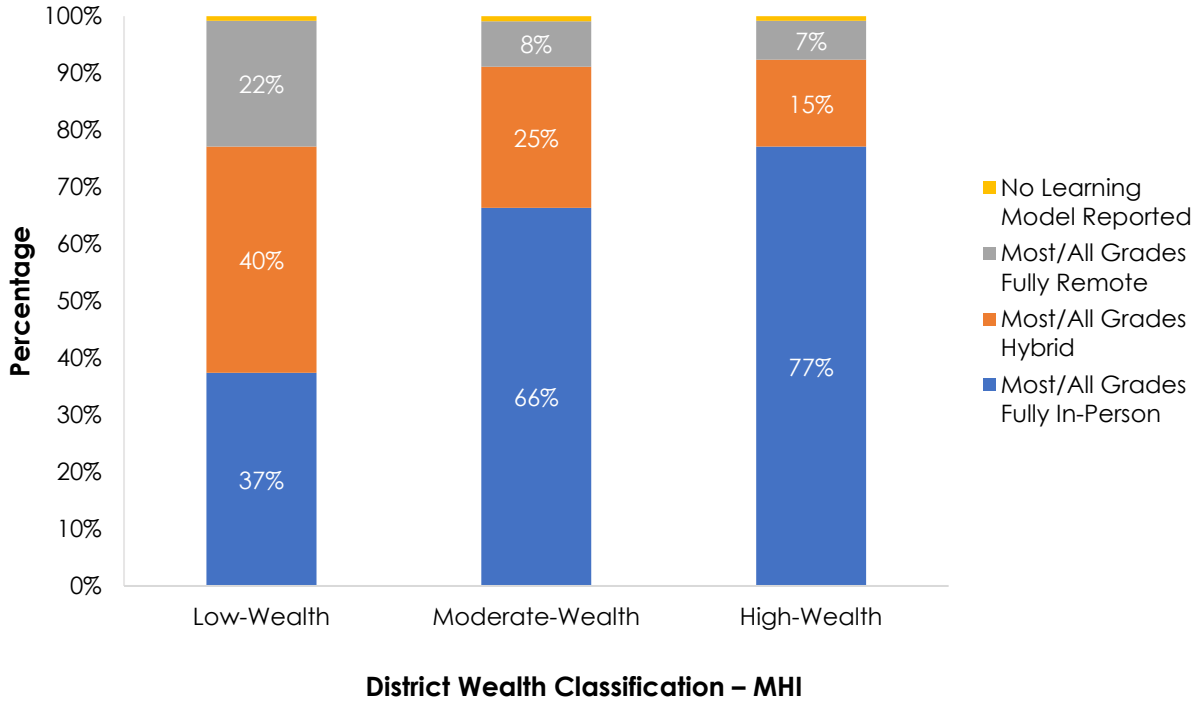


Figure 6: Percentage of Reported Weeks by Learning Model Type for Each District Wealth Classification – MHI[30,31]



Regardless of the district wealth classification, the average attendance rate was similar among the districts for the 2019-20 academic year. For the 2020-21 academic year, Moderate- and High-Wealth districts experienced minor changes, year-over-year, for their attendance rates, while Low-Wealth districts had a decrease of about four percentage points. Tables 4 and 5 below detail the average attendance rate for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years by district wealth classification.

Table 4: Average Attendance Rate Comparison for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 School Years by District Wealth Classification – ENGLPC[32,33]

District Classification	2020-21 Average Attendance Rate	2019-20 Average Attendance Rate	Percentage Point Change
Low-Wealth	89%	94%	-4%
Moderate-Wealth	94%	95%	-1%
High-Wealth	95%	96%	0%

Table 5: Average Attendance Rate Comparison for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 School Years by District Wealth Classification – MHI[34,35]

District Classification	2020-21 Average Attendance Rate	2019-20 Average Attendance Rate	Percentage Point Change
Low-Wealth	89%	94%	-5%
Moderate-Wealth	94%	95%	-1%
High-Wealth	96%	96%	0%

District Spending

Lastly, districts[D] have been grouped into three different classifications based on district spending:

- Low-Spending: Districts in the first quartile of per-student spending;
- Moderate-Spending: Districts between the first and third quartiles of per-student spending; and
- High-Spending: Districts in the third quartile of per-student spending.

Consistent with previous findings, Figure 7 below shows a considerable gap in the percentage of reported weeks with most or all grades fully in-person among Low- and High-Spending districts. High-Spending districts spent 82 percent of the reported weeks with in-person instruction, whereas Low-Spending districts only spent 59 percent with in-person instruction — a 23 percentage point difference. This translates into roughly five additional weeks with most or all grades fully in-person for High-Spending districts.[36,37]

[D] For analysis in which per-student spending is used, charter schools have been excluded. Charters are not fiscally responsible for special education services and student transportation, and, as a result, are not fiscally comparable to local or regional public school districts.

Figure 7: Percentage of Reported Weeks by Learning Model Type for Each District Spending Classification[38,39]

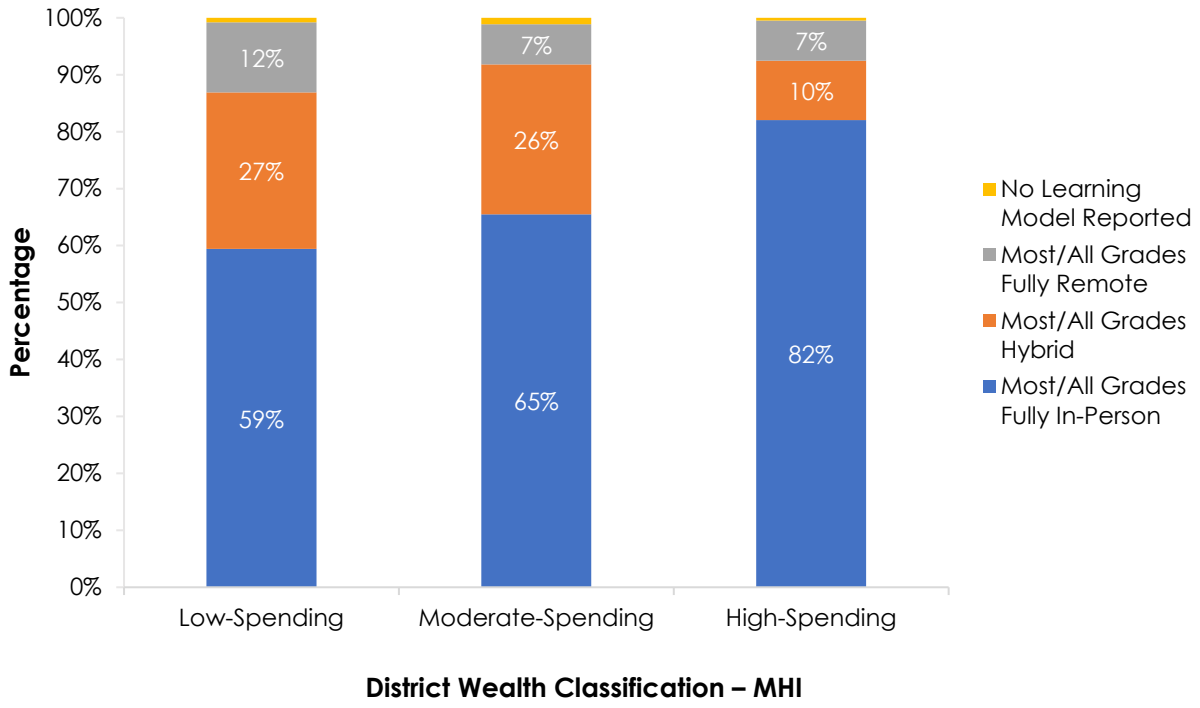


Table 6 below details the average attendance rate for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years for each district spending type. Again, High-Spending districts experienced no real change in their average attendance rate year-over-year. However, Low-Spending districts experienced a decrease in their average attendance rate.

Table 6: Average Attendance Rate Comparison for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 School Years by District Spending Classification[40,41]

District Classification	2020-21 Average Attendance Rate	2019-20 Average Attendance Rate	Percentage Point Change
Low-Spending	91%	94%	-3%
Moderate-Spending	93%	95%	-2%
High-Spending	96%	96%	0%

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions in school districts across the country. However, higher-need, lower-wealth, and lower-spending districts have been impacted at a greater rate than other districts. Consistently, these districts reported less weeks with in-person instruction and lower attendance rates. Conversely, districts reporting more in-person instruction and higher attendance rates tend to have less need and more resources to support students. The disparities that exist among these districts are not unprecedented, but the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and worsened them.

As districts continue to tackle the impacts of the pandemic, another aspect that will eventually need to be addressed is learning loss. The pandemic resulted in an extended period of remote learning for students, but there has been little data to reveal its full impact on student learning.

To address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government has provided aid to state governments to support school districts in the form of stimulus packages. On May 14, 2020, Governor Ned Lamont announced the State of Connecticut would be receiving $111 million under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Security (CARES) Act.[42] Connecticut then received an additional $492.4 million in aid under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief II (ESSER II) Fund through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act in January 2021.[43] In the most recent federal aid package, Connecticut received an additional $1.1 billion through the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, which was signed into law on March 11, 2021.[44] This has resulted in a total of $1.6 billion in one-time aid to the CSDE to aid local educational agencies in preventing, preparing, and responding to the coronavirus.[45]

As the State continues to allocate these funds to districts, district leaders will have to implement best practices to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their students. Students have been impacted significantly, in terms of the type of instruction they receive and the rate at which they attend school in person. However, the federal aid their districts receive can help address the longstanding academic and social-emotional effects of this pandemic.

The State of Connecticut must also play a role in ensuring school districts, regardless of wealth or student need, can prepare students for college and career readiness and successful outcomes after students leave the educational system. While the Connecticut General Assembly has taken steps toward equitably funding the state's local and regional public school district students, Connecticut still lacks a funding method that fully accounts for student needs and allows higher-need districts to be able to provide their students with the same opportunities to succeed as districts that serve students with fewer learning needs.

To fix the funding inequity that exists among local and regional public school districts, and resolve the mismatch between student needs and resources, Connecticut must address the local funding inequities that occur between lower- and higher-wealth communities. Addressing these disparities would help create a more fair and equitable education

finance system that distributes state education dollars in a transparent, consistent, and predictable manner based on student learning needs and community wealth.

Endnotes

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