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## **Elementary and Secondary Education in the Pandemic: An Analysis of School Reopening and Distance Learning in Rhode Island**

### **Executive Summary**

This report analyzes the key aspects of the public elementary and secondary education experience in Rhode Island during the pandemic.

Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo ordered all public elementary and secondary schools to close as of March 13, 2020. Compared to many other states, Rhode Island responded quickly to offer remote learning to all students. However, like schools across the country, Rhode Island schools had little to no experience in distance learning. Some school districts struggled to provide the internet access and devices needed for remote instruction, attendance fell in some districts, and there were gaps in the educational supports required for students with Individualized Education Plans. Not surprisingly, educators, families, and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) agree that students experienced some learning loss in the spring.

For the fall, the governor and RIDE have pushed to open schools for in-person instruction. However, public health requirements and concerns have made it difficult for many schools to fully reopen. Based on RIPEC's analysis, about one-third of the students in Rhode Island's 36 districts had access to full in-person learning, while approximately half had partial access to in-person learning, and about one-eighth had no in-person learning access as of October 13, the date set by the governor and RIDE for full reopening (see page 22).

The districts that have fully reopened are suburban and rural districts in higher-income areas of the state, while many of the state's urban districts in lower-income communities are relying more heavily on distance learning. As there is clear consensus among academic researchers that, overall, the educational outcomes of students engaged in virtual learning are worse than those of students in traditional brick-and-mortar schools, it is troubling that in-person learning is less likely in districts in Rhode Island that are also among the state's lowest performing (see page 21).

RIPEC's analysis also found that there is a wide range of distance learning strategies employed across school districts, likely resulting in varying student outcomes. While academic studies and RIDE's own guidance advise that instructors use a combination of synchronous and asynchronous

learning, distance learning approaches range from almost fully asynchronous to live-streaming in-person instruction. Also, while many (and perhaps all) districts chose to offer professional development experiences that centered on distance learning, there was no mandate that teachers receive professional development on distance learning.

With respect to students' access to technology, RIPEC found that school districts have improved access to technology as compared to the spring. However, internet access does not appear to have received the same attention from districts as has access to devices, and student access to both reliable devices and internet hotspots remain a concern in some districts. There also appears to be no statewide accounting to identify the full extent to which gaps in student access to technology remain.

As for funding, \$50 million more in total was made available to public schools under the fiscal year 2020 supplemental budget than was appropriated under the enacted budget, with lower-income districts receiving the larger portion of this additional aid (see page 15).

These findings inform RIPEC's short-term policy recommendations that policymakers should:

- Seek to expand in-person instruction to promote greater equity between districts, and appropriate additional funding to the extent needed to advance this goal
- Ensure that every student has access to a suitable device and broadband
- Encourage educational leaders to modify distance learning methods to align with best practices
- Require all teachers engaged in delivering remote instruction to receive professional development in distance learning
- Require greater transparency regarding key elements of public-school operations during the pandemic

In the long-term, RIPEC suggests that policymakers:

- Enable Rhode Island public schools to build proficiency in distance learning
- Determine whether the decentralized structure of Rhode Island's public education system delivers the best outcomes for all students

RIPEC's full report is available [here](#).