



RESEARCH BRIEF

Spotlight on English Learners

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The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a nationally representative survey to better understand how school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. [The National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19](#) was sent to leaders in 2,500 school districts and 260 CMOs in late May 2020. In spring 2020, the pandemic led schools across the country to close their buildings, requiring millions of students to continue learning from home and leading to sudden shifts in how educators provide instruction, leadership, and support. In this brief, we present some of the survey results focused on English learners (ELs). Our hope is that these results inform future practices of educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Serving English Learners During the Pandemic

As awareness of the pandemic increased across U.S. communities in March 2020, districts closed their school buildings and sought alternative ways to meet their students' needs, including providing meals, ensuring students' safety and well-being, and continuing instruction. The [First Look brief](#) previewed survey results about districts' approaches to distance learning during the pandemic (Garet, Rickles, Bowdon, & Heppen, 2020). In this brief, we look specifically at

About This Brief

- This brief presents survey results about districts' supports and resources for serving English learners (ELs) during the pandemic in spring 2020.¹
- These results are based on responses from 753 school districts. EL enrollment ranged from 1% to 79% in the responding districts.²
- Given the potential association between percentage of ELs and resources, we show results separately for districts with high and low percentages of ELs.³
- Because of the potential for different levels of resources in rural versus urban areas (e.g., internet access), we also present findings separately by district geography.⁴
- Findings indicate that urban districts were more likely to provide resources and instructional requirements than rural districts. In addition, high-percentage EL districts were more likely to provide these supports and requirements than low-percentage EL districts.

the district structures and resources provided to teachers serving ELs at the early stages of the pandemic in spring 2020.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the initial focus was on meeting critical needs, and administrators started to develop and implement a variety of distance learning approaches to provide continuity of teaching and learning.



During school closures in spring 2020, districts varied widely in services provided to ELs (Muñiz, 2020). This brief examines the extent to which districts provided resources for ELs and established instructional requirements for teachers of ELs and whether these resources and requirements differ by district type.⁵

Resources for teachers of ELs. We examined three resources—whether districts provided EL-specific distance learning materials, instructional materials in Spanish, and interpreters or family liaisons to communicate with and support multilingual families.

We found that urban districts were more likely to provide all three of these supports than rural districts. Moreover, high-percentage EL districts were more likely to provide these supports than low-percentage EL districts (see Figures 1 through 3). These results are consistent with research that suggests many districts lack infrastructure for educating ELs. That is, due in part to their size and locale, rural districts and schools may find it more difficult to develop and sustain new instructional approaches (Hansen-Thomas, Coady, Gagnon, & Van Dine, 2019).

Instructional requirements. We examined two requirements: whether districts required teachers to meet virtually with ELs, and whether they required collaboration between general education teachers and EL teachers. Urban districts were more likely to have these requirements than rural districts, and high-percentage EL districts were more likely have such requirements compared to low-percentage EL districts (Figures 4 and 5).⁶

Survey Items of Focus in This Brief

Has your district provided any of the following supports for students and families who need them during the COVID-19 school closures?

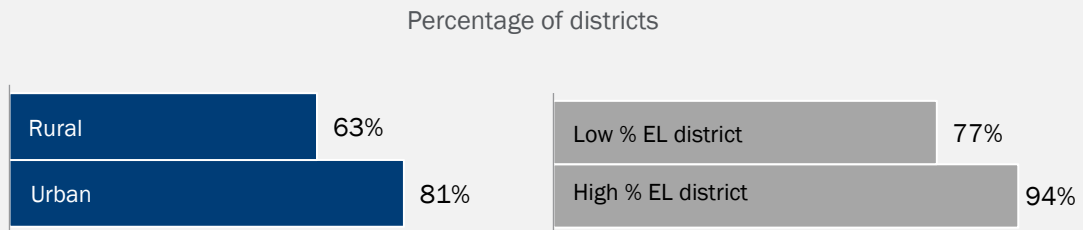
- Interpreters or family liaisons to communicate with and support multilingual families

Has your district done any of the following to help teachers support English learners (ELs) in a distance learning environment?

- Provide teachers with EL-specific distance learning resources for students.
- Provide learning materials in Spanish.
- Require teachers or specialists to meet virtually with EL students (one on one or in small groups) for language support (designated English language development).
- Require general education/content area teachers and EL specialists to collaborate on planning instruction for ELs.

Resources for Teachers of ELs

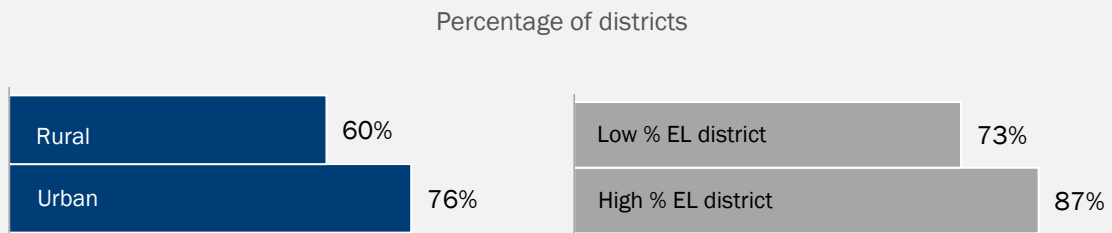
Figure 1: EL-specific distance learning resources for students, by district characteristics



Sample sizes: 206 rural districts, 476 urban districts, 449 low percentage English learner districts, 186 high percentage English learner districts

Note. Differences by district type were statistically significant.

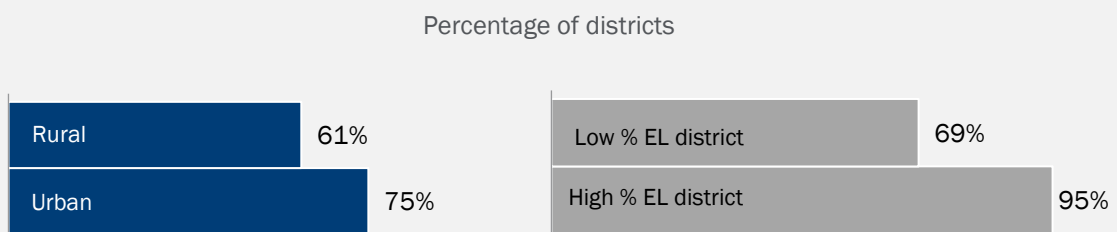
Figure 2: Learning materials in Spanish, by district characteristics



Sample sizes: 199 rural districts, 455 urban districts, 429 low percentage English learner districts, 179 high percentage English learner districts

Note. Differences by district type were statistically significant.

Figure 3: Interpreters or family liaisons, by district characteristics



Sample sizes: 245 rural districts, 501 urban districts, 485 low percentage English learner districts, 189 high percentage English learner districts

Note. Differences by district type were statistically significant.

Instructional Requirements

Figure 4: District requirements for teachers to meet virtually, by district characteristics

Percentage of districts

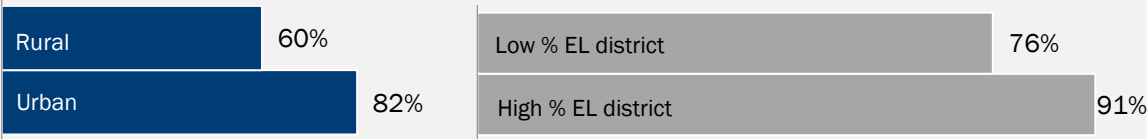


Sample sizes: 208 rural districts, 474 urban districts, 449 low percentage English learner districts, 185 high percentage English learner districts

Note. Differences by district type were statistically significant.

Figure 5: District requirements for teachers and English learner specialists to collaborate on planning instruction, by district characteristics

Percentage of districts



Sample sizes: 205 rural districts, 476 urban districts, 450 low percentage English learner districts, 185 high percentage English learner districts.

Note. Differences by district type were statistically significant.

References

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- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). Table 204.20. English language learner (ELL) students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, by state: Selected years, fall 2000 through fall 2017. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_204.20.asp?current=yes

Endnotes

¹ AIR funded and led the survey development, which was administered by our partner NORC at the University of Chicago. We sent the survey to school districts in every U.S. state and Washington, DC, as well as to charter management organizations (CMOs) across the country. The sample contained 2,536 districts, stratified by state (for districts in 12 focal states) or region (for districts in the remaining states) and locale (urban, suburban, town, and rural). Within these strata, districts were drawn with probability proportional to the square root of enrollment. Large districts were drawn with certainty. The survey was open between May 20 and September 1, with 753 public school districts and 91 CMOs responding. The results reported in this brief use design weights adjusted for nonresponse in the 64 state- or region -by -locale strata. More information about the survey methodology is available in a [technical supplement](#).

² Information on the percentage of English learner (EL) enrollment was calculated from the 2018–19 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The distribution of percentage of EL enrollment for the analytic sample matched the distribution for the full sample of districts with information available on EL enrollment from the CCD.

³ In our analytic sample, 72% of districts were categorized as low EL enrollment districts and 28% were categorized as high EL enrollment districts. We defined low EL district enrollment as less than 10% and high EL district enrollment as 10% or higher. This threshold corresponds to the average EL enrollment in the United States in fall 2017. Supplemental analyses explored the cross-classification of districts by geographic locale and percentage of EL enrollment, but the findings were not statistically significant.

⁴ We defined rural and urban based on locale classifications provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (Geverdt, 2015), where rural districts are located within a Census-defined rural territory and urban districts are located within a Census-defined urbanized area or cluster (encompassing cities, suburbs, and towns). The demographic composition of rural and urban districts with non-missing information on EL enrollment was as follows: average percent ELs was 8% for rural districts and 7% for urban districts, average poverty rate was 17% for rural districts and 16% for urban district, and average enrollment size was 1,215 students in rural districts and 5,726 students in urban districts. The demographic composition of high and low percentage EL enrollment was as follows: average percent ELs was 3% for low percentage EL districts and 23% for high percentage EL districts, average poverty rate was 15% for low percentage EL districts and 19% for high percentage EL districts, and average enrollment size was 3,547 students in low percentage EL districts and 6,929 students in high percentage EL districts.

⁵ To capture the effects of COVID-19 on school districts and CMOs in the United States, the survey asks questions about how districts and CMOs have coped with issues related to the pandemic, including the timing of school closures; distance learning approaches and challenges; supporting ELs and students with disabilities; district policies and requirements, such as grading and graduation; staffing and human resources; and health, well-being, and safety.

⁶ Respondents were excluded from analyses presented in Figures 1 through 5 if they reported that the survey question was not applicable to their district.



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