

The Disparities in Remote Learning Under Coronavirus (in Charts)

By [Benjamin Herold](#)

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The messy transition to remote learning in America's K-12 education system as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has been marked by glaring disparities among schools, according to nationally representative surveys of U.S. teachers and school district leaders administered by the EdWeek Research Center.

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Among the most significant are gaps between the country's poorest and wealthiest schools around access to basic technology and live remote instruction, as well as the percentages of students who teachers report are not logging in or making contact.

Following are nine key findings from two surveys, completed online by a total of more than 2,600 teachers and school district leaders. The first survey was administered on March 24 and 25. The second was administered on April 7 and 8.

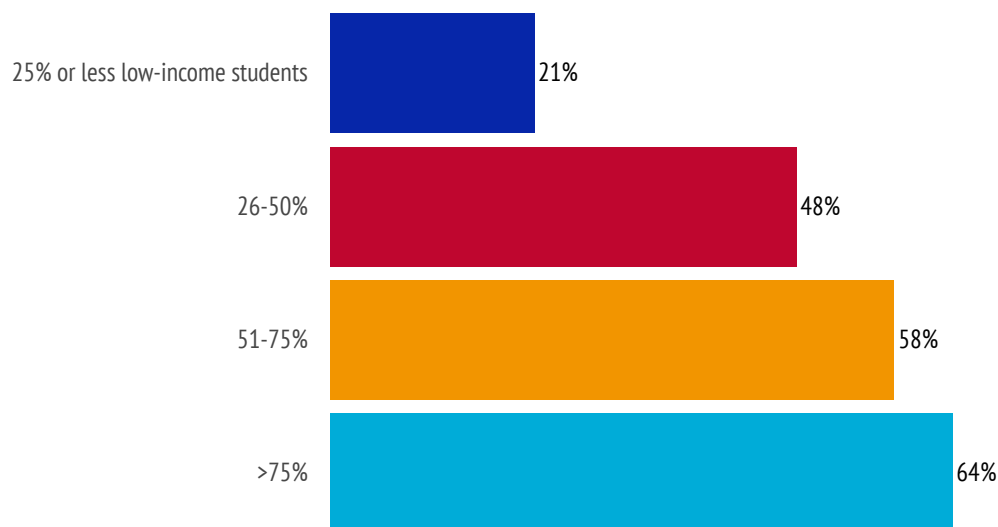
The big takeaway, according to experts who reviewed the data at Education Week's request?

As it's done with the country's health care system, economy, and social safety net, the pandemic is exposing and exacerbating the deep inequities that have long shaped American public education.

"There's so much loss and distress that is being concentrated in communities that need quality schooling the most," said Janelle Scott, an education and African-American studies professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "I think there's a need to pull back and think about what [public education] means in relation to the magnitude of this moment."

1. Big Gaps in Basic Technology Access

Percentage of districts leaders who said students' lack of technology access is a major challenge to teaching during Coronavirus-related closures (March 24 & 25)



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center

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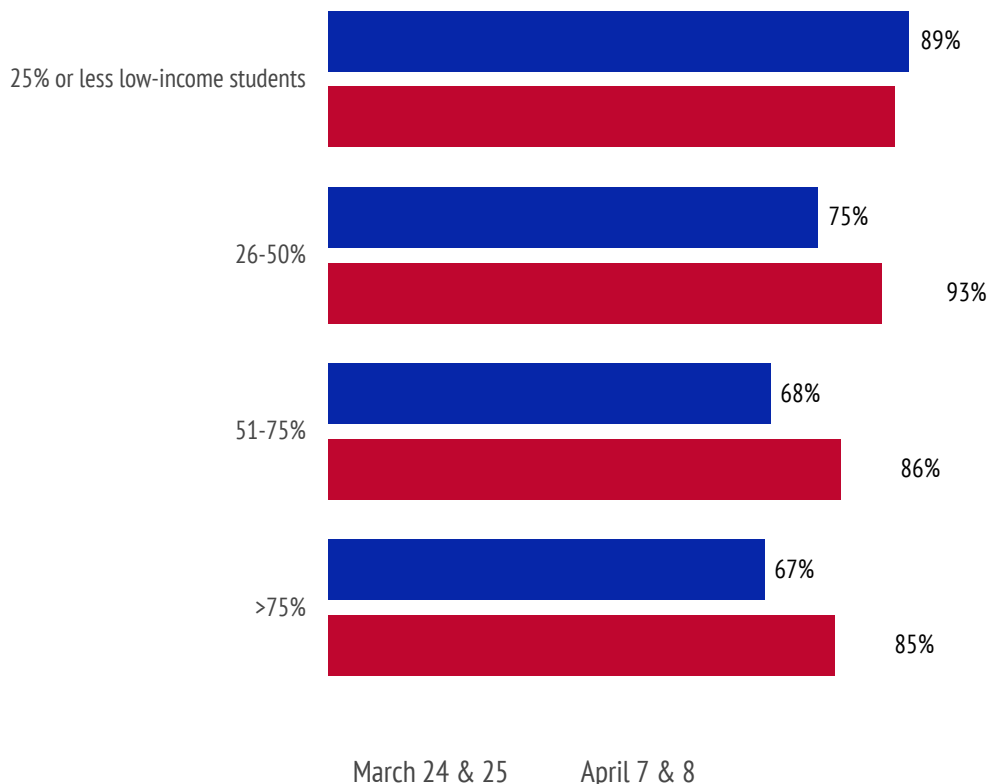
Two of the biggest hurdles to moving America's schools online have been an inadequate number of digital devices for students and millions of families' lack of high-speed internet at home. These gaps in basic technology access are particularly stark along socioeconomic lines: In districts with the lowest percentages of students from low-income families, just 1 in 5 leaders reported in late March that a lack of basic technology is a "major" problem, compared with nearly two-thirds of leaders in districts where the highest percentages of students are from low-income families.

The resulting scramble led to often-messy efforts to distribute schools' existing stockpiles of classroom laptops and tablets and created a supply backlog that continues to hamper schools' ability to order new devices, especially Chromebooks. And while numerous districts have partnered with internet service providers to expand access to free or low-cost connections, advocates have called on government to make a more systematic effort to close the digital divide.

"It's not the time to be timid," said FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, a long-time proponent of more aggressive federal efforts to eliminate disparities in access to high-speed internet, in a March 31 statement. "We have the authority right now to extend the reach of broadband and close the 'Homework Gap' so we connect millions of children who desperately need to get online for school."

2. Reducing Early Disparities in Whether Teachers Were Teaching

Percentage of teachers who said they were engaging in instruction while their school is closed due to the Coronavirus (March 24 & 25 vs. April 7 & 8)



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center



In the first weeks of coronavirus-related school closures, the EdWeek Research Center also found that the percentage of teachers in America’s lowest-income schools who said they were engaging in instruction was 22 points lower than the percentage of teachers in the highest-income schools.

All told, 74 percent of teachers who completed the survey on March 24 or 25 said they were still teaching. But that figure rose to 89 percent in public schools where one-fourth or fewer of students are from low-income families, and it dropped to 67 percent in schools where more than three-fourths of students are from low-income families.

Some of that discrepancy may have been the result of the disparities in technology access. Many districts also adopted multi-stage remote-learning plans, including initial shutdowns over extended Spring Break periods that allowed for time to plan before instruction began. Still others intentionally held off on any remote instruction due to equity concerns.

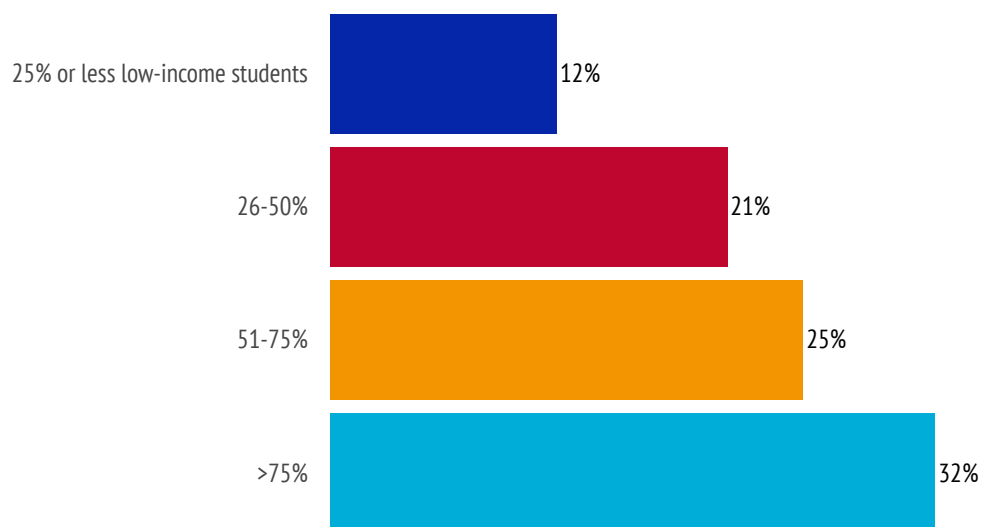
By early April, the gap had narrowed considerably, to 10 percentage points, with 85 percent of teachers in the country's lowest-income schools saying they were engaged in instruction.

Moving forward, said Scott, the University of California, Berkeley professor, it's critical to monitor the extent to which the coronavirus is making existing inequities more acute.

"It's the same story we've long known in K-12 schools," she said. "Districts with more resources are likely going to be able to avail themselves of higher quality instruction, and higher-income families are going to be much better positioned to support [remote] learning than less-resourced families who don't have the privilege of staying at home."

3. Significant "Truancy" in Lower-Income Schools

Percentage of teachers who said their students were essentially "truant" during Coronavirus-related closures (April 7 & 8)



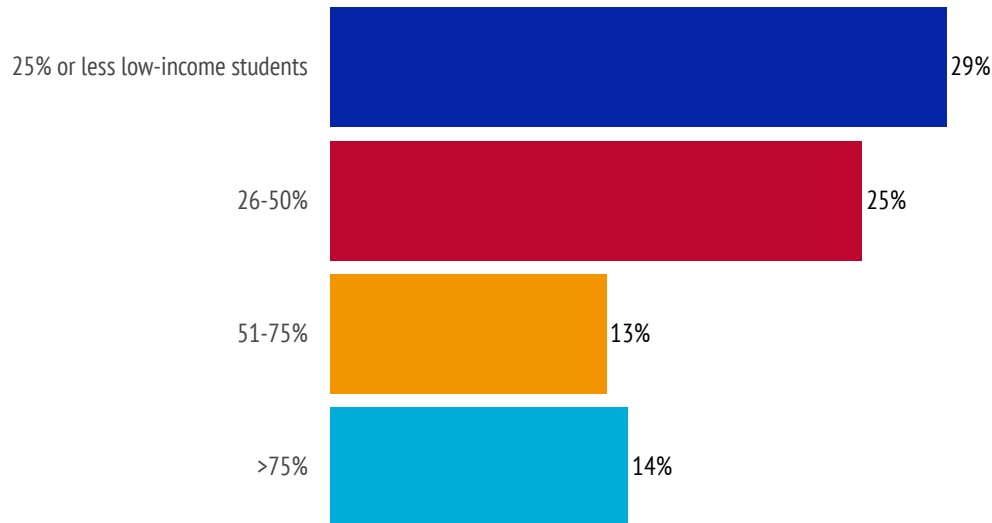
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center

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One big cause for potential alarm: Teachers in the highest-poverty schools report that nearly a third of their students are not logging in or otherwise making contact. That figure is almost three times higher than the percentage of truant students reported by teachers in schools with the lowest number of students from families living in poverty.

4. Higher Poverty Schools Less Likely to Offer Live Instruction

Percentage of district leaders who said their district was offering live classes in which students interact with each other and with teachers during Coronavirus-related closures (March 24 & 25)



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center

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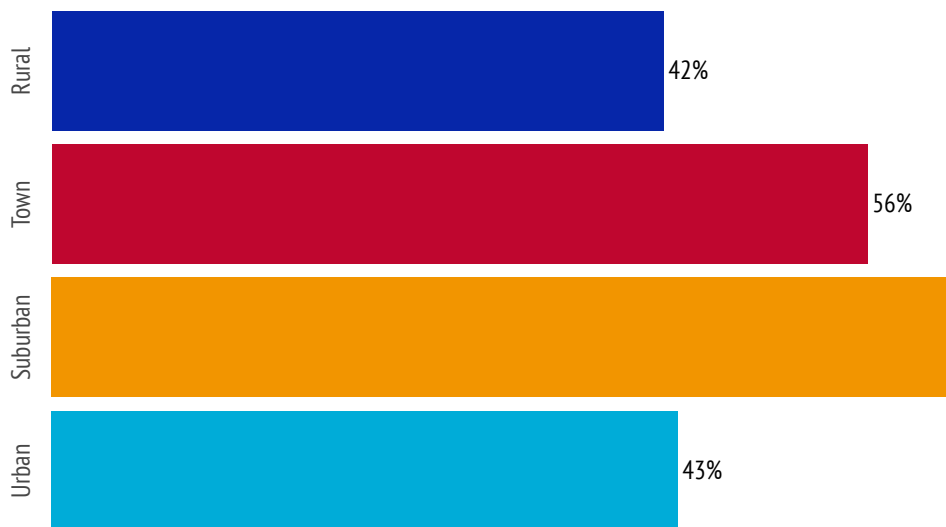
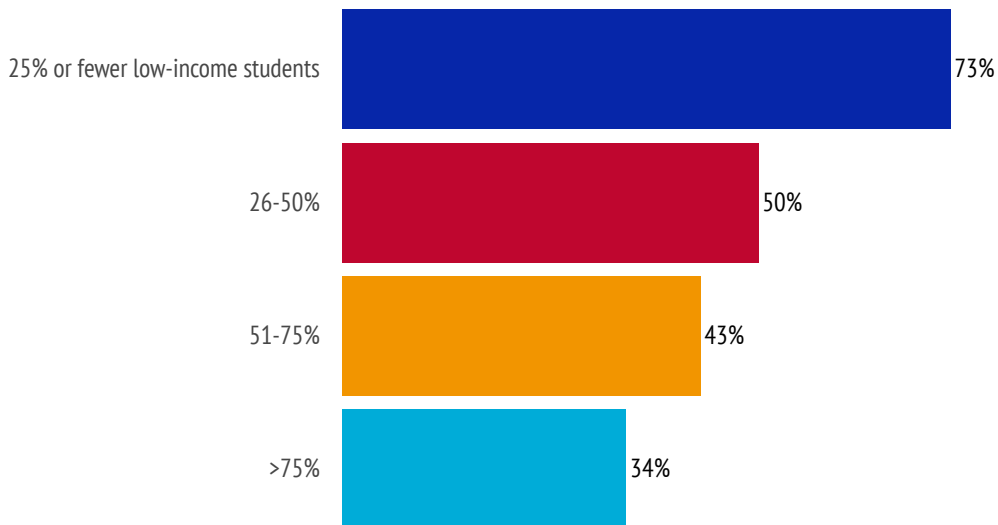
Disparities in the type of instruction available to students are also evident.

So-called synchronous instruction, which takes place live and allows for real-time interaction, is not inherently better than asynchronous instruction. Indeed, there are often advantages to letting students access and digest material on their own time, at their own pace—especially in the midst of a pandemic, where the logistics of getting through a day can be difficult, and multiple people in a home might be sharing a single device.

But for many children, under many circumstances, the chance to talk with a teacher and see friends and receive personal support for social-emotional concerns remains fundamental to what school is all about. And the results from the EdWeek Research Center survey again found big disparities here, with leaders of districts serving the lowest percentages of students from low-income families being more than twice as likely to say they provided fully synchronous instruction than leaders of districts serving the highest percentages of students from low-income families.

5 & 6: Rural, Urban, and High-Poverty Districts Far Less Able to Reach All Students

Percentage of district leaders who said they were able to provide online learning opportunities to all students during Coronavirus-related closures (March 24 & 25)



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center

Whatever type of online instruction schools and districts are attempting during their coronavirus-related closures, the biggest challenge has been doing it equally for all students. Federal and state governments have struggled to provide consistent guidance on the subject, largely because the underlying issues and tradeoffs involved are so thorny and difficult.

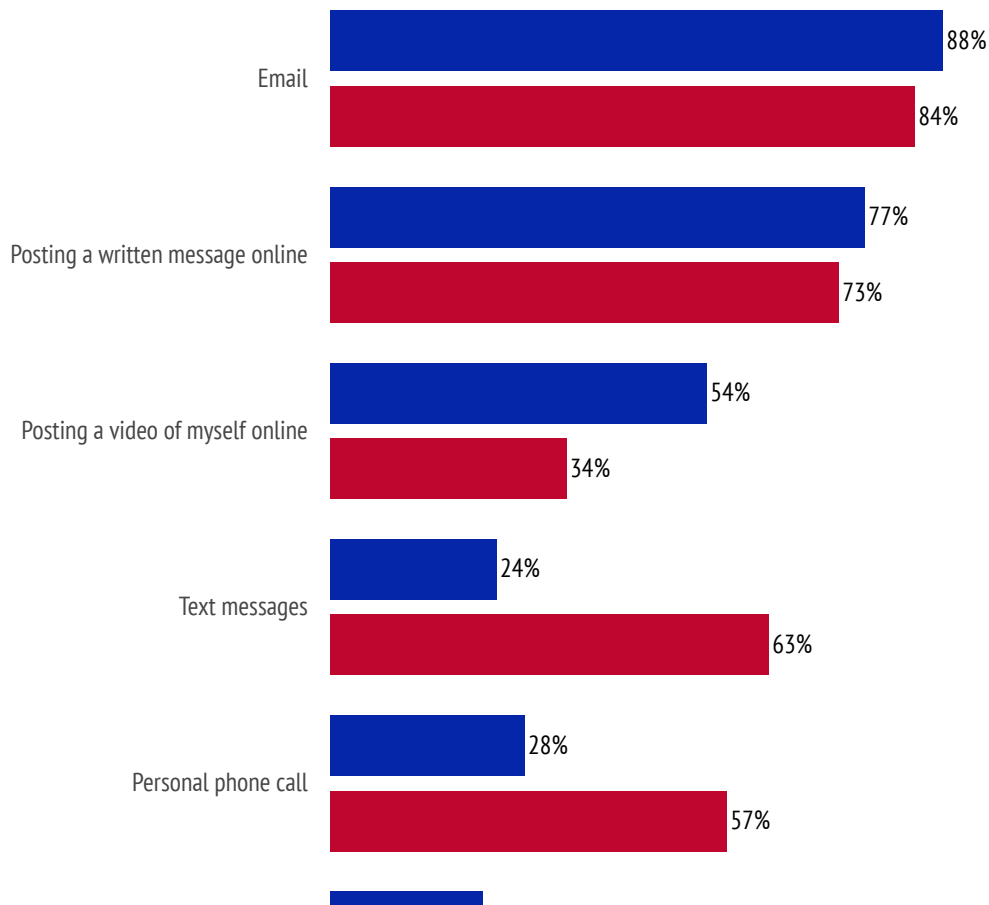
Some leaders said their districts are navigating the challenge better than others—likely because they have a stronger technology infrastructure and narrower range of needs and circumstances to accommodate. Sixty-two percent of leaders from suburban districts and 73 percent of leaders from districts with the lowest percentages of low-income students said they're able to provide online learning opportunities to all students.

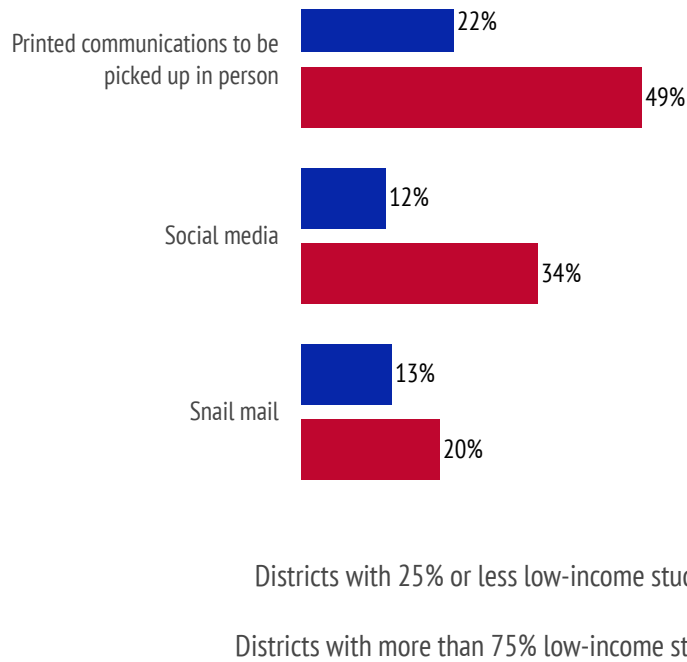
At the other end of the spectrum sit rural and high-poverty districts, where well under half of leaders say they're able to provide online learning opportunities for all students. Rural schools in particular face a triple challenge of poor connectivity, limited staff and technical expertise, and lack of political clout, leaving them to stitch together patchwork solutions when the coronavirus pandemic hit.

"This sheds a light on the fact that some rural districts didn't have the infrastructure set up beforehand to make [online learning] happen," said Allen Pratt, the executive director of the National Rural Education Association.

7. More Lower-Income Schools Using Wider Range of Communications Tools

Percentage of teachers who said they used the following methods to interact with students since schools closed due to Coronavirus (April 7 & 8)





SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center



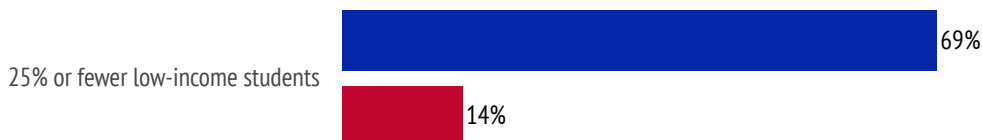
On the flip side, teachers in America’s lowest-income school districts—including many in rural areas—appear to have been more creative than their counterparts in more affluent districts at finding multiple ways to reach students.

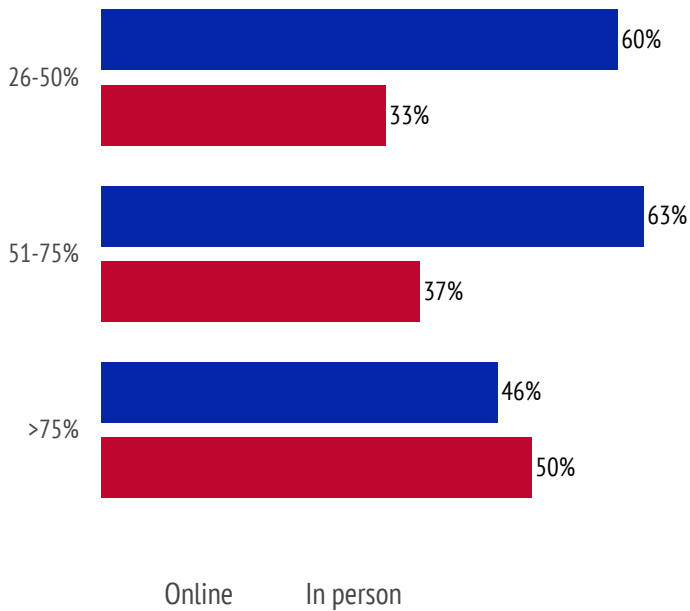
The vast majority of all schools are using email, and teachers in wealthier districts were more likely to post messages and videos online, the EdWeek Research Center found in early April.

But teachers in the lowest-income schools were more than twice as likely as teachers in those schools to use text messages, phone calls, social media, and printed communications to reach students, and they were also far more likely to send material out via snail mail.

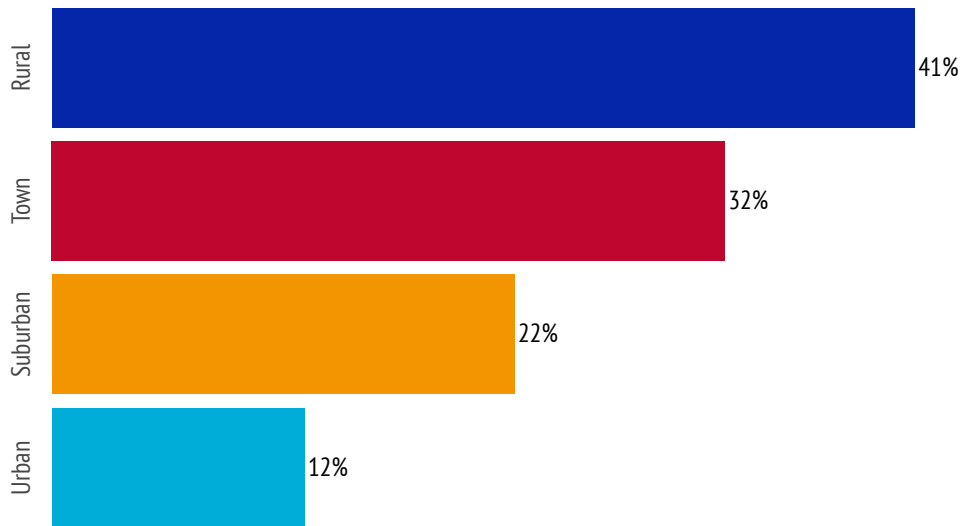
8 & 9: Big Differences in Distributing Schoolwork Online vs. In-Person

Percentage of teachers who said they were collecting and returning students work online vs. having families pick up work packets in person (March 24 & 25)





Percentage of teachers who have had families pick up work packets in person:



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center



Just as the EdWeek Research Center survey showed sharp disparities in access to technology access and live instruction, it also revealed big differences in how high- and low-income districts approached distributing schoolwork. Teachers in the districts with the highest percentage of students from low-income families were about equally likely to report collecting and returning work online and having families pick up work packets in person. In districts with the

lowest percentage of students from low-income families, on the other hand, 69 percent of teachers said they distributed work online, while just 14 percent said they did so in person.

Similarly, teachers in rural districts were far more likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to say they've provided student work in person. Often, this takes the form of work packets bundled with meals that are available for pickup at schools or delivered by school buses.

Tech-access issues almost certainly play a role, as do worries in denser communities about facilitating the spread of the virus by creating spaces where many people are gathering together. But in rural communities, where the population is sparse and the distances between home and school are often great, the dynamics of in-person pickup or delivery of schoolwork create one more hurdle resulting from a pandemic that has totally upended American life—especially in places already struggling to get by.

“This is definitely highlighting the gaps we already have,” said Pratt, the National Rural Education Association Director.

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