For the 2021-22 school year, reopening policies in 6 New England states emphasize in-person learning and limit online options. Massachusetts and Connecticut restricted most districts from offering robust and accessible remote learning options. Only Maine’s state education agency recommended districts include remote learning in their contingency planning.

Against this backdrop, online learning options in the region are limited compared to the offerings of school districts elsewhere in the country. Our review of high school offerings in 81 districts and 5 charter school networks across the six New England states found:

- **Few school systems offered full-time online learning:** Only 8% of school systems we reviewed offered a full-time remote program, a significant decrease last year, when 90% of school systems provided details for “opt-in” virtual schooling.
  - This contrasts to 65% of large, urban school systems nationally tracked by CRPE, that offered a full time remote learning program to all students.
  - After a year of challenges for teachers who juggled a mix of in-person and virtual students, this year’s online programs keep virtual classes separate from physical classrooms, with no concurrent teaching or “livestreaming.”
• State policy and cross-district collaboration drove online learning: Online learning programs in New England typically arise from state policy or groups of districts working together:
  » Of the four Vermont districts offering a full-time remote option, three partnered with Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative, a pre-existing state-run virtual learning program that allows high schoolers to take classes online part-time or full time.
  » Similarly, Newport Public Schools (RI) partnered with East Bay Educational Collaborative to offer remote learning options for all grade levels.
  » Maine and Massachusetts make online options available statewide, while in New Hampshire, a statewide virtual charter school expanded to provide more remote options to students.
  » Although Massachusetts restricted remote learning for most students, pre-existing law allows districts to create “Single District Virtual Schools (SDVS).” These programs, including those operated by Chelsea and Springfield Public Schools, needed state approval which would have required advance planning to be ready in time for this school year.
  » Under new Connecticut legislation signed in June, Waterbury Public Schools is developing plans to offer a virtual high school option for the 2022-23 school year.

• Part-time options remain rare: Only 7 percent of systems offered a part-time virtual option for high school students, which could provide increased flexibility, expanded course offerings, or credit recovery.
  » All four of the Vermont districts we reviewed that offered a full-time remote option also offered part-time remote learning.

• Most districts in our review did not detail plans to support learning for students required to quarantine or isolate: Just over half of systems in our review (55 percent) communicated a plan for instructing students remotely under quarantine due to COVID-19.
  » 21% (18 systems) mentioned a general reference to continuity of services.
  » 14% (12 systems) committed to providing asynchronous instruction, 2 synchronous instruction, and only 3 committed to providing both.
  » This lack of specificity compares unfavorably to 2020, where all districts communicated plans to offer students real-time instruction during remote learning.

What this means for policy
The lack of flexibility to provide remote learning to individual students, combined with the lack of viable virtual options in many parts of the region, leaves many New England families without online learning options, and many schools without a viable way to ensure students will have access to instruction if they have to stay home from school due to a possible COVID exposure. Rather than restricting or discouraging online learning, states should find ways to regulate online learning effectively, support quality programs, and ensure districts can keep students learning even when they have to quarantine.
About this Project

Think Forward New England explores the region’s landscape of learning, surfaces new instructional approaches and strategies that solve essential problems while centering the adolescent perspective, and probe on the conditions that shape high school systems’ adaptations. As part of this work, in October 2020, we built a regional district response database that tracks 81 districts and 5 charter schools. Our sample, though not statistically representative, was drawn to include the largest districts by enrollment in each state and to include high-poverty, as well as a spread of rural, urban and suburban districts from each state. The average sampled district has 18% of students living in poverty, and 40% of the districts have more than 20% of students living in poverty. Sources include publicly available information from district websites, social media, and news media reports. Data was collected between October 19 and October 31, 2020 and again from September 7-20, 2021.

If you see information in one of our databases that needs updating, please contact crpedatabase@uw.edu