The Evidence Project at CRPE

Matching supports to student needs: Survey results highlight where schools, policymakers can help

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For the vast majority of the nation's students, remote learning remains an integral part of the learning experience, and computers and internet access are essential equipment.

Almost 70 percent were attending school fully or partially remote as of October, according to a nationally representative survey of American families.

Parents of students attending school remotely rate the academic qualities of their children's school more poorly than parents whose children have returned to school in person. And, higher percentages of parents of remote students are concerned about their children's academics, social experiences, and psychological well-being. Remote learners do not have in-person contact with their teachers, and their in-person interaction with peers and friends is more limited—these realities are negatively impacting children.

Since remote learning may be the only option for millions of students through the winter, and possibly through the entire 2020-21 school year, policymakers must understand what supports are in place—and what additional supports will be needed—for children attending fully or partially remote.

With the October wave of nationally representative Understanding America Study survey data of 1,335 households over time, we have an emerging picture of who remote K–12 learners are and what resources are available to them.

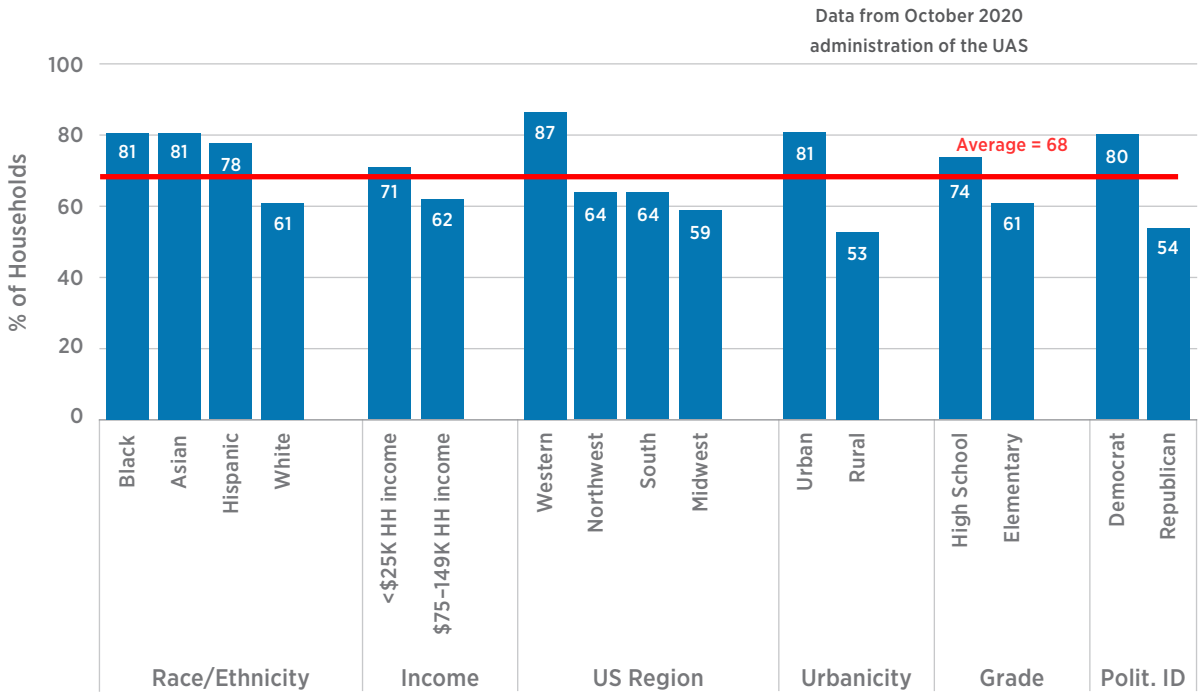
- While schools have made huge strides since March providing technology to students at home to help close the digital divide, families still need more support. Approximately 5 percent of families report they still do not have a device for their children to participate in remote learning, and approximately one in ten students must share devices with others in their household. Internet access is better—only 2 percent report no access, but more than one in five families report continued internet connection interruptions. These statistics are worse for lower-income families.
- Students face gaps in academic support. Less than half (40 percent) of parents who say their children need tutoring report their schools provided it, and roughly half of parents with a high school degree or less feel equipped to help their own children with homework.
- More than one in ten families with children in full or partial remote learning have formed "pods," where students learn together in in-person groups with the help of a tutor or teacher. The practice is more common among lower-income families—possibly reflecting informal childcare networks.

Together, these data show how the gaps in computer access, childcare, and academic support can exacerbate educational inequity. Policymakers and school system leaders should focus their attention on improvements in each of these areas, particularly for lower-income households.

Remote learning attendance differs nationwide, by many factors

Overall, half of students (50 percent) are fully remote. Another 18 percent attend through a mix of at-home and in-person learning, a hybrid model. This attendance pattern differs meaningfully across different groups. While children in 61 percent of white households are fully or partially remote, 81 percent of Asian, 81 percent of Black, and 78 percent of Hispanic children are. Other groups more likely to be remote include children from lower-income households, in urban areas, and attending high school (compared to elementary school).[1] Partisanship is also a strong indicator of who continues to learn in a remote setting—children in families that support the Democratic Party (80 percent) are much more likely to attend remotely than those in Republican families (54 percent).

Figure 1. Percent of Households with Children Attending School Fully or Partially Remote



1 In the lowest-income families (less than $25,000 annually), 71 percent of children are attending fully or partially remote, relative to 62 percent in median-income families ($75,000 to $149,000). Children in 87 percent of schools in the Western region of the U.S. are attending fully or partially remote compared to 64 percent in the Northeast, 59 percent in the Midwest, and 64 percent in the South. In rural areas, 53 percent attend fully or partially remote compared to 81 percent in urban areas. Remote attendance in elementary school is lower (61 percent) than in high school (74 percent).

District-provided interventions support remote-only and hybrid instruction

Computers and internet access are critical to the quality of children's full or partial remote learning. Parents report districts were able to meet this need in the fall of 2020, with 80 percent saying their school district offered to provide their children a computer (60 percent of parents accepted the offer). Internet provision rates were half of computer provision rates. Overall, 40 percent of parents report their district offered internet access, and 11 percent accepted the offer—including 23 percent of Black families, 8 percent of white families, and 38 percent of families with household incomes below $50,000 per year.

Last spring, 27 percent of the lowest-income (less than $25,000 per year) households reported that their children did not have a computer with which to participate in remote learning. But by this fall only 7 percent report not having a device to participate in remote learning. (Note that in the fall, the survey asked parents about "any devices for learning," not only computers.) For the lowest-income group, 16 percent reported no access last spring, improving to 6 percent this fall.

But these questions about technology access at the household level don't speak to the experience of a given child, particularly when multiple children are in the home simultaneously engaged in school activities. Among children attending school remotely (either fully or partially), 11 percent must share their computer with someone else in the family. Sharing computers is not similarly distributed across different income levels: 14 percent of families earning less than $50,000 per year have children sharing devices, while just 4 percent of families earning $150,000 or more per year are doing the same. This means computer distribution must continue for low-income families.

And while 76 percent of parents report good internet connectivity for their children's remote learning, 21 percent report that access is slow or drops frequently. Slow, laggy, or dropped internet connections can be frustrating at a minimum, but can realistically translate into missed instruction, student absences, an inability to meaningfully communicate with teachers and peers, and ultimately, failing grades. These connectivity limitations are most severe for the lowest-income group (less than $25,000 per year), for whom 37 percent suffer from slow access and frequent drops, and 27 percent of households making $25,000 to $49,000 annually reported the same. Stable internet access provision must be improved as well for low-income households.

Parents attempt to fill gaps in district provision of tutoring and childcare

In addition to computer and internet access, tutoring is a research-backed support districts could provide to assist full or partial remote learners. However, districts across the board are not yet offering tutoring at acceptable levels, with only 26 percent of all responding parents reporting that their school offers tutoring (regardless of whether their children need it or are participating in it). The statistic improves a bit if looking only among parents who report their children need it—to 40 percent—but this leaves 60 percent of students who need tutoring and are not receiving any. One-quarter of parents report acquiring one-on-one or small-group tutoring for their children independently from their school: 21 percent among lowest-income families and 28 percent among highest-income families.

Among full and partial remote learners, 11 percent of children are learning in "learning pods," defined as "In-person groups of students learning together with the help of an in-person tutor or teacher, organized by families, not by schools. Students in pods are engaging in the school's curriculum and following the school schedule." Pod use varies by race, family income, and

parental education. For example, 18 percent of families in the lowest-income group report using pods, relative to 4 percent in the highest-income group. Among the parent group with the lowest levels of education, 16 percent report using pods, relative to 7 percent of the parent group with the most education. White families report pod use the least frequently (9 percent) and Black families report pod use the most (16 percent).

While these results may be counterintuitive given the concerns publicized over the summer that pods would exacerbate inequities, they align with the pre-pandemic practice of sharing childcare responsibilities among a group of adults—more necessary among lower-income parents forced to work outside of their homes or unable to afford formal center-based childcare.

Parents feel at least somewhat equipped to help children with their schoolwork, though with wide variation by parents' education levels. Whereas over three-quarters of parents with a bachelor's degree or higher feel they can help their children with their math, science, social studies, and English language arts homework (ranging from 76 to 82 percent by subject), half of parents with a high school degree or less feel they can help with math (51 percent), 59 percent with science, 62 percent with social studies, and 63 percent with English.

Children from low-income (and other at-risk) households have higher rates of remote attendance, less access to sufficient technology, and unsatisfactory access to tutoring supports, with parents less confident to support students academically at home. These children may suffer most this year unless schools are able to further focus supports where they are most needed.

Conclusion

Students learning from home need computers, high-quality internet connections, tutoring supports to help them catch up from months of learning loss, and an adult able to fill in and provide additional help if needed. Our findings show some families, especially in low-income households, continue to lack equitable access to these necessities.

District leaders and policymakers should focus their attention on improvements in each of these areas, particularly for lower-income households. At a minimum, they should:

1. Keep pushing on device distribution to ensure that all students have access to a dedicated device that they don't have to share, and continue to monitor internet access to ensure that students have a stable connection.
2. Prioritize investments that will help close gaps in students' access to academic supports, such as tutoring.
3. Seek ways to support parents in their efforts to support their children's learning.

The shift to remote learning has placed unprecedented demands on families and school systems. The burdens have fallen heaviest on low-income households. Without further action, the inequities that plagued public education before the pandemic will only grow worse.

About the authors

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About the data

Between early April and late October 2020, we fielded five surveys to parents of K–12 children through the Understanding America Study (UAS), a nationally representative survey administered to the same households over time by the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research. The UAS includes 1,335 households with at least one K–12th grade child as of the 2020-21 school year. With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Science Foundation Discovery Research PreK–12 program, parents answered questions over the seven-month time period about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their children's experiences. Results described are based on the September 30 through October 28 survey except as otherwise noted, see toplines and crosstabs for this survey administration.

About the Evidence Project

The Evidence Project is an initiative from the Center on Reinventing Public Education to advance solutions-oriented analysis of the K-12 response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project brings together researchers from around the country under the banner of narrowing the gap between research and policy. Learn more at evidence-project.org.