



Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on South Dakota K-12 education

# **Understanding the impact**

State and local decision makers are eager to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected South Dakota schools, teachers, students, and families during the 2020-21 school year. This report examines what this challenging school year looked like, impacts of the pandemic, and how the South Dakota Department of Education will address pressing needs going forward.

Information in this report primarily comes from the COVID-19 Impact Survey, which the department distributed to South Dakota's 830 state-accredited schools in May 2021. The survey participation rate was over 96%. Additional information comes from various state agency data sources.

District Type	School Type	Completed Surveys	Total Schools	Participation Rate
Public	Elementary	328	330	99.4%
	Middle/Junior High	152	154	98.7%
	High School	158	160	98.8%
	Other	47	60	78.3%
Non-Public	Elementary	50	52	96.2%
	Middle/Junior High	11	11	100.00%
	High School	15	17	88.2%
	Other	1	2	50.0%
Tribal/BIE	Elementary	18	19	94.7%
	Middle/Junior High	7	9	77.8%
	High School	10	11	90.9%
	Other	4	5	80.0%
Total		801	830	96.5%

#### Table 1: COVID-19 Impact Survey participation rates

Note: "Other" category includes entities such as preschool, auxiliary placement programs, and alternative high schools.

# **Putting students first**

The 2020-21 school year was a year like no other. Educating students in the midst of a global pandemic demanded flexibility, patience, creativity, and perseverance from South Dakota educators, students, and families.

Recognizing the value of the full school experience, school leaders and educators committed early on to offering safe in-person learning as much as possible. This commitment honored not only the academic needs of students, but also their social and emotional needs, and their overall

mental and physical health. As a result, most South Dakota students were able to enjoy the benefits of continuous learning throughout the pandemic.

Unlike some states where schools were still struggling to open their doors in spring 2021, South Dakota schools were able to begin the 2020-21 school year largely on time and in person. This trend continued throughout the year. School-level data from the COVID-19 Impact Survey indicates that nearly 90% of school buildings (an average of 88.9% of schools per month) reported most students receiving in-person instruction.



Notwithstanding these successes, some of the state's most at-risk students were not able to participate in in-person learning. Many schools located on reservations, for example, operated virtually for much of the school year, in line with tribal ordinances.



#### Mode of instruction August 2020 through May 2021

Figure 1 illustrates how South Dakota students received instruction throughout school year 2020-21. A hybrid/modified schedule refers to a combination of in-person and remote learning. For instance, some school buildings were closed at regular intervals for a cleaning period or provided in-person instruction for a reduced number of students per day to limit the potential of viral transmission.

### Types of distance learning

As shown in Figure 1, in-person learning was the predominant mode of instruction during the 2020-21 school year. Schools also relied on two forms of distance learning to provide instruction. These forms of distance learning were: remote and virtual. Remote learning is defined as a short- or long-term learning arrangement that utilizes district curriculum. Virtual learning is defined as a longer-term arrangement using the South Dakota Virtual School or online curriculum purchased specifically for virtual learning.



### **Remote learning**

During school year 2020-21, remote learning for individual students, or groups of students, sometimes became necessary for several reasons – due to illness, being identified as a close contact, or a modified school schedule (ex. some schools closed their doors one day a week for deep cleaning). The COVID-19 Impact Survey asked schools to indicate *how* students were learning while they were remote. Schools could select multiple options. Remote learning used existing district curriculum.

#### How schools delivered remote instruction



Note: 641 schools responded to the survey question about how they delivered remote learning. Percentages in this figure are calculated by dividing the number of responding schools by 801.

### Virtual learning

Not reflected in Figure 1 is full-time virtual learning. This was the other type of distance learning arrangement that some schools offered during the 2020-21 school year. This arrangement utilized either the South Dakota Virtual School or an online curriculum (different from district curriculum) purchased specifically for learners participating in this method (ex. Edgenuity, Odysseyware, k12.com, Acellus, etc.).

The majority of schools (58.9%) provided a virtual learning option for the entire school year. The data suggests a reduction in demand for the virtual learning option as the number of students opting to participate dropped from nearly 20,000 students in the fall to just under 14,000 students in the spring.



### Schools that offered full-time virtual learning

Figure 3

### Enrollment

Due to COVID-19 and the variety of education paths families selected for school year 2020-21, public school districts saw unexpected enrollment shifts, both up and down. Only 25 school districts saw fall enrollments within 1% of their average trend from the three prior fiscal years. In other words, very few public districts saw the enrollments they would have expected in a normal year. Whether any of these enrollment changes mark the beginning of new trends has yet to be seen.

To address the impacts of these shifts, Governor Noem proposed, and the South Dakota Legislature supported, a one-time redistribution of \$11 million in state aid to general education. This funding went to all public school districts to help with common issues around staffing, employment contracts, and food service.

### **Mitigation makes it possible**

Schools relied on a variety of mitigation strategies to make in-person learning possible. Schools adjusted practices and procedures in ways that made sense based on local conditions. Shown here are the top mitigation strategies as reported by school leaders on the COVID Impact Survey.

Since March 2020, when COVID-19 forced schools to close their doors, the departments of Education and Health have held regular webinars for school superintendents and school



Note: See Appendix A for complete list of mitigation measures schools implemented

nurses. These webinars connected school leaders directly with the state's chief health officials, including the State Epidemiologist and Secretary of Health. The webinars focused on providing the most up-to-date scientific information regarding the virus, mitigation strategies recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), procedures for contact tracing in schools, testing options available to schools, vaccination of school personnel, as well as pertinent education questions.

### Tracking the virus in schools

Schools carefully monitored spread of the virus within their buildings. To assist in this process, the South Dakota departments of Education and Health offered a voluntary sentinel surveillance testing program for K-12 school staff, designed to identify potential virus spread in the school setting by testing asymptomatic individuals on a weekly basis.

Sixty-four public, private, and tribal school systems participated in this program, which represents 270 individual schools. The maximum positive asymptomatic rate of sentinel testing participants was 4.5%. Over the course of the school year the average rate of incidence within asymptomatic adults in the school environment was 1.5%.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 4

Shortly after the start of the school year, the agencies added a voluntary rapid testing program aimed at supporting local identification of symptomatic students and staff members with COVID-19 and isolating them from the school setting as quickly as possible. Over the course of the rapid testing program, 129 districts reported 11,506 rapid testing results that provided district leaders with the ability to determine transmission risk quickly and initiate mitigation strategies.

Both COVID-19 testing programs involved on-site testing at the schools, training for those involved in administering the tests, and free courier service and lab processing.

The departments of Education and Health also established a process to track positive COVID-19 numbers in schools for both staff and students, which was in place at the start of school year 2020-21. These numbers were shared not only with school leaders, but also, in the aggregate, with the general public. Some school districts also posted their local case numbers, in the aggregate, on their websites. This transparency, along with community spread information posted on the Department of Health's website, allowed schools and families to make sound decisions based on local conditions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Sentinel testing rates are calculated on a weekly basis and the infectivity rate is represented as: positives/participants



### COVID-19 Cases\* Within South Dakota K–12 Schools

Week Reported to SD-DOH

\* Includes cases reported to the South Dakota Department of Health (SD-DOH) starting August 9
\*\* Includes public and non-public accredited schools and approved programs

During the 2020-21 school year, data was collected through the established survey process at local health care providers within the South Dakota Department of Health's disease reporting system. The above epidemiological curve provides an understanding of the number of cases across the K-12 system over the course of the school year. The total number of cases identified was 15,794 with 11,860 of those cases associated to students and 3,934 cases associated to staff.

Using the available COVID-19 case count data by school building, fall enrollment student counts, and estimated numbers of adults within each school building environment<sup>2</sup>, estimated cumulative and daily average incidence rates were calculated. The data suggest a cumulative incidence rate of 7.71% (N=13,583)<sup>3</sup> with elementary schools representing the lowest rate (N=4,770, 5.54%) and high school representing the largest rate (N=5,778, 11.32%).

<sup>2</sup> An adult to student ratio of .171 was used to calculate estimated adult counts within each physical school environment

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Estimated cumulative incidence rates were calculated by dividing total school year case counts by school type by school type student fall enrollment counts plus estimated adult population counts

### Meeting technology needs

Internet and device access were crucial for all students to continue learning. Students could find themselves in a remote or virtual learning mode at any time throughout the school year due to illness, being identified as a close contact, a modified school schedule, or family choice to opt out of in-person learning.

Approximately 90% (87.9%) of responding schools indicated that all students had access to a school-provided device during the 2020-21 school year. Most of these schools allowed students to take home school-provided devices.

To help ensure that all students also had internet access, the Department of Education partnered with the Bureau of Information and Telecommunications and local telecommunications companies to establish the K-12 Connect program. This effort was aimed at providing broadband connection to low-income families. The K-12 Connect program provided broadband connection to 624 households, impacting 1,103 students.

Alliance Communications Cooperative	Midstate Communications
Beresford Municipal Telephone Company	RC Technologies
Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Telephone Authority	Santel Communications Cooperative
Faith Municipal Telephone Company	Swiftel Communications/Brookings Municipal Telephone
Fort Randall Telephone Company	TrioTel Communications
Golden West Telecommunications	Valley Telecommunications Cooperative
Interstate Telecommunications Cooperative	VAST
Kennebec Telephone Company	Venture Communications Cooperative
Long Lines Broadband	West River Cooperative Telephone Company
Midco	West River Telecommunications Cooperative

The following telecommunications companies participated in this valuable program:

In addition to the K-12 Connect program, over 40% (43.8%) of reporting schools offered internet access outside of school for students who did not have access at home during the 2020-21 school year.

### How schools provided internet access for families



Note: Percentages calculated based on 801 responding schools.

## Impacts of the pandemic Learning loss

Schools worked hard to ensure that learning continued even when school buildings closed in March 2020 and stayed closed through the end of the 2019-20 school year. As the 2020-21 school year began, it was crucial for educators to determine where students were at academically and gauge any loss of knowledge and skills or reversals in academic progress that may have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As reported via the COVID-19 Impact Survey, schools indicated that they primarily measured learning loss through various assessments, evaluations, and observation.

### Percentage of students experiencing learning loss

0-2% **NONE** Schools: 2.4% of students Schools: 3-25% **FEW** 23.1% of students Schools: 26-50% SOME 17.9% of students Schools: 51-75% MANY 8.5% of students Schools: 76-97% MOST of students 1 1% 98-100% ALL Schools: 0.7% of students

(spring 2020 to fall 2020, as estimated by school leaders)

Note: Approximately 43.0% of schools indicated learning loss was not measured.

#### How schools addressed learning loss

In situations where students were not staying caught up and experiencing learning loss as a result, school leaders identified a variety of ways in which they sought to intervene and support students. Regardless of school type (Elementary, Middle/Junior High, High School, Other), the primary intervention identified was contacting parents. This pattern held whether the mode of instruction was in-person, remote, or virtual. Parent involvement in a student's education is widely recognized as a strategy for improving student achievement. Other commonly mentioned interventions included sending school/district staff out to a student's residence and miscellaneous other strategies.

Figure 6

### Percentage of students who have caught up from learning loss

(as estimated by school leaders)



Note: Approximately 43.9% of schools indicated recovery from learning loss was not measured.

### Staying caught up

While schools offered a variety of learning options in school year 2020-21, there are still concerns among stakeholders that students in underserved groups have exhibited a lack of student engagement in virtual and remote modes of instruction and could be significantly impacted by lost instructional time. Students who opted for online education, or who attended districts that did not offer in-person instruction for most of the year, may not have had the support they needed to meet standards.

Via the COVID-19 Impact Survey, schools reported how many students stayed caught up prior to the pandemic and how many stayed caught up in each mode of instruction during the pandemic. Schools reported the highest level of success in keeping students on track through in-person learning.



#### School leaders' estimates of how many students stayed caught up

Early data regarding attendance patterns during the 2020-21 school year show that approximately 6.4% of public school students (8,669 out of 135,984) missed 30 or more days of school, which translates to six full school weeks. That compares to 3.8% of the student population (5,122 out of 134,993) missing 30-plus days in the 2018-19 school year. Breaking down the data further, certain subgroups of students are disproportionately represented. For example, 71.9% were economically disadvantaged students – a group that makes up 36.3% of the total enrollment in K-12 public schools, and 48.2% were Native American students – a group that makes up 10.6% of the total enrollment in K-12 public schools. Additionally, there were 32 public school districts with more than 5% of their student population missing six weeks or more of school.

Variations in attendance policies at the district level, and how a district reports absences, may account for some of this fluctuation. Regardless, students who missed a significant amount of instruction time are likely to not stay on expected pace in their learning.

Table 2:		
Students with 30	)+ days of absence	

Year	# of students	Fall enrollment count	%	
2018-19	5,122	134,993	3.8%	
2020-21	8,669	135,984	6.4%	

### Table 3: Composition of public school studentsmissing 30+ days

Student subgroup	% of students missing 30+ days in 2020-21	% of student population (2020 fall enrollment)
Economically disadvantaged	71.9%	36.3%
Native American	48.2%	10.6%
9-12 students	50.4%	29.6%
Special Education	20.5%	16.0%
Hispanic	10.8%	7.1%

### Students with disabilities and students learning English

Educators and other stakeholders have expressed particular concerns for students with disabilities and English learners, who they say have struggled increasingly with feelings of isolation, anxiety, and stress during the pandemic. The COVID-19 Impact Survey addressed how schools worked with these two student groups throughout the pandemic.

#### Students with disabilities

For the 2020-21 school year, one-third of schools (33.3%) reported having students with disabilities participate in full-time virtual learning. Over half of schools (55.8%) reported having students with disabilities participate in remote learning. Schools provided unique supports for these students, including the following:

- One-on-one virtual sessions with special education teachers and paraprofessionals
- In-person support at school when most other students were not in the building
- Assistive technology and technology tutorials
- Extended time on assignments
- Phone calls and texts
- Home visits

Approximately half of schools (46.9%) provided only in-person special education services to students with disabilities with 7.0% indicating that in-person services were declined.

Only 8.7% of schools reported being unable to provide certain special education services due to the pandemic. These were primarily services that require close contact, like occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, and monitoring of behavior plans. Schools largely addressed being unable to provide these services on a case-by-case basis.

#### **English learners**

Approximately half of the responding schools (48.1%) reported having English learner students. Of those, 19.0% reported that English learners participated in remote learning during the 2020-21 school year. Only 10.1% of these schools said their English learners participated in full-time virtual learning.

Schools used several delivery methods to provide English language development services to their English learner students in remote or virtual settings. These included: video calls with teachers, online modules, and learning packets that were sent home.

### **Families**

During a regular school year, thousands of South Dakota students rely on their local school for healthy breakfasts and lunches. While the COVID-19 pandemic made providing school meals more difficult, school nutrition staff worked hard to ensure students continued to have access to meals.

In spring 2020, when school buildings were physically closed to students, the focus was on providing meals to go. Many schools prepared bagged lunches for pick-up and some delivered via bus routes. As students returned to schools in August 2020, disposable items remained a necessity, along with increased cleaning and altered serving schedules to allow for social distancing. For some schools, it was almost like adding an entire program to their meal service department as they managed meals for students in school buildings and those learning remotely or virtually.



### School lunches and breakfasts pre-pandemic and during COVID-19

#### **SCHOOL YEAR 2018-19**

Figure 11

In addition to these efforts, the South Dakota departments of Social Services and Education also collaborated to provide additional assistance with food costs to families who lost access to free or reduced-price school meals in response to COVID-19 related school closures.

### **Educators**

Educators and other school personnel dealt with many challenges as they sought to meet the academic, social-emotional, mental, and physical health needs of students. Schools sometimes struggled with staffing and finding substitute teachers, as they sought to keep adults healthy, so they could continue to serve students. Many teachers had to balance in-person teaching and providing instruction to students in distance learning formats. At times, they provided both kinds of instruction simultaneously.

To help address the COVID-19 situation, approximately 80% of schools (78.5%) declared some or all school staff to be "essential employees." These staff were exempted from quarantine for a close contact, as long as they remained asymptomatic. This was one important way to continue to keep schools open for in-person learning. There were instances where schools had to change mode of instruction due to staff shortages (illness, quarantine).

Schools reported placing additional expectations on teachers during the 2020-21 school year and doing a variety of things to support teachers in taking on those additional duties.



### **Expectations of teachers beyond traditional duties**

Note: Percentages calculated based on 801 responding schools.

#### How schools supported their teachers



Note: Percentages calculated based on 801 responding schools.

The Department of Education supported educators throughout the year by providing open lines of communication and up-to-date, relevant information. The department partnered extensively with the Department of Health to provide superintendents with guidance and technical assistance specific to the virus, its spread, and COVID mitigation strategies. The department also provided specialized learning opportunities for special education directors, teachers of English learners, counselors, and school food service directors. These venues allowed educators to share common challenges and gain support from one another as well as the state. In partnership with the Department of Social Services, educators, administrators, and school counselors also had opportunities to attend sessions separately – all focused on COVID-19 stress and coping mechanisms.



# Where do we go from here?

Partnerships with stakeholders were key to success for South Dakota's safe return to school in

August 2020. These partnerships among state agencies, local school districts, and other professional education organizations were essential to a constant flow of communication that provided local leaders with the data and information they needed to make decisions based on local conditions and need. The Department of Education will continue to rely on these partners as students' needs following the pandemic are identified and addressed.

### Leveraging Partnerships:



### **American Rescue Plan**

In March 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was signed into law. The CARES Act created and provided initial funding of the Education Stabilization Fund, which includes the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). In December 2020, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) was signed into law and provided additional funding to schools through the ESSER fund. K-12 schools in South Dakota received approximately \$41 million and \$170 million respectively. A third round of funding came in March 2021 with passage of the American Rescue Plan (ARP). Under this third round of funding, South Dakota schools are set to receive \$382 million through the ESSER fund. The South Dakota Department of Education will receive a small portion of this total for state-level activities to support schools, students, and learning.

Broadly, the purposes of the ARP ESSER funds include reopening schools safely; supporting sustained access to in-person instruction through summers, school years, and after school; and addressing the academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs of students. The federal funds must be obligated by September 2024.

In considering how to best serve students and responsibly spend these dollars – both at the state and local levels – the department asked interested parties to provide input via an online survey.

Based on the public comment received and regular contact with stakeholders, the most pressing issues facing South Dakota schools and students can be grouped into three broad categories:

- 1) Supporting strong instruction and educational opportunities
- 2) Addressing students' social-emotional and mental health needs
- 3) Continuing to address issues of educator recruitment and retention

#### Supporting strong instruction and educational opportunities

Identifying, engaging with, or re-engaging with students who may have missed out on instruction and educational opportunities – for a variety of reasons – will be critical in the months ahead. The department expects these students to run the gamut from pre-school-age youngsters in need of special supports as they prepare to enter the formal K-12 setting to high school students who dropped off the radar at some point during the pandemic. State-level spending will focus on strategies designed to engage and/or re-engage these students and provide strong instruction for academic attainment for all students based on their individual needs.

The department is also engaging stakeholders statewide to understand the future of distance learning in South Dakota. This workgroup includes K-12 educators and other pertinent stakeholders in the process to define or redefine what distance education is in South Dakota and how it might look in the future. The group is meeting throughout summer 2021 and will compile recommendations for policies, resources, and best practices related to distance learning.

#### Addressing students' social-emotional and mental health needs

Experience tells us that the pandemic is having repercussions far beyond physical health. The less tangible, but very real, social-emotional impacts of the pandemic – depression, isolation, stress – have taken a toll on educators, school staff, students, and families. Student mental health and well-being is an area where the department is partnering with other state agencies to impact positive change. COVID funding will allow South Dakota to make strides in supporting students' needs in a more holistic manner. One partnership with the Department of Social Services will focus on providing access to mental health services, via technology, to youth in remote areas of the state where access would not otherwise be possible.

Other strategies will include training opportunities for school administrators and educators related to trauma-informed care and youth mental health, making data more accessible (and therefore actionable) for administrators, and providing South Dakota-specific toolkits and resources from which school leaders can draw to meet their students' needs. Leveraging the expertise of organizations that provide mental health services will be critical to these efforts.

#### Continuing to address issues of educator recruitment and retention

Over the last six years, South Dakota has taken proactive steps to address educator recruitment and retention challenges. The pandemic likely will exacerbate some of those challenges; therefore, understanding the pandemic's true impact on the education workforce will be paramount. That understanding will drive strategies that will target both traditional students coming out of teacher preparation programs and individuals interested in entering the teaching field through an alternative pathway.

The department anticipates additional recruitment/retention strategies to be recommended by the Teacher Compensation Review Board, which is meeting this summer. Strategies will likely build upon programs implemented successfully through the 2016 Blue Ribbon legislation. The department expects to work with educator preparation programs and professional education organizations to establish an updated, multi-dimensional approach to educator workforce needs.

### Summary

The next several years offer an unprecedented opportunity to invest in student learning and overall well-being - ensuring that South Dakota emerges from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic with an education system that is stronger than ever. As we continue to get a clearer understanding of students' needs coming out of the pandemic, the Department of Education will work closely with its partners to address the impacts of these last 16 months – implementing interventions, strategies, and supports designed to provide sustained benefits to students and positively impact the K-12 system as a whole.

# Appendix A

Ailingtion Stratogy		OOLS
Aitigation Strategy	#	%
CLEANING	7/0	05.00/
Increased cleaning of frequently touched surfaces within the school	768	95.9%
Increased cleaning of shared materials	670	83.6%
Discouraged shared materials/required students to provide more of their own materials	642	80.1%
Increased cleaning of frequently touched surfaces on school buses	620	77.4%
Increased time between when shared materials were used and made available again (i.e. books in the library, shared materials in classrooms)	534	66.7%
HEALTH		
Encouraged families to symptom check before entering the school building	733	91.5%
Educated teachers, staff, and families about when they and their children should stay home	729	91.0%
Taught and reinforced hand washing and use of hand sanitizer	707	88.3%
Worked with state, local, or tribal health department to facilitate contact tracing and case investigation	606	75.7%
Encouraged use of masks	520	64.9%
Checked students for symptoms upon arrival at school	387	48.3%
Required use of masks	372	46.4%
Added or increased use of a school nurse	247	30.8%
ENVIRONMENTAL		Î
Adjusted physical layouts (i.e. turning desks to face the same direction)	554	69.2%
Shut down self-service food or drink options (i.e. salad bar, condiment bar, drinking station)	548	68.49
Installed physical barriers where it is difficult for individuals to stay 6 feet apart (i.e. plexiglass)	512	63.9%
Installed physical guides to promote physical distance (i.e. tape on floors, arrows, signage, one-way hallways)	493	61.5%
Changed the way communal spaces were used (i.e. school library)	461	57.6%
Took steps to improve ventilation and air turnover	349	43.6%
Closed communal spaces (i.e. school library)	121	15.1%
Adjusted physical layouts (i.e. turning desks to face the same direction)	91	11.4%
Took steps to improve ventilation or air turnover	70	8.7%
SCHEDULE		
Staggered use of shared spaces (i.e. hallways, recess, lunch)	512	63.9%
Staggered school arrival and/or drop-off times or locations	261	32.69
Modified certain course offerings (ex. band, art, shop)	253	31.6%
Changed school calendar to adjust for COVID-related time (ex. no school on Wednesdays for deep clean)	162	20.25
Modified pre-K or early learning opportunities	43	5.4%
Cancelled certain course offerings (ex. band, art, shop)	32	4.0%
Cancelled pre-K or early learning opportunities	9	1.1%
MINIMIZING CONTACTS		
Limited non-essential visitors	632	78.99
Assigned seats (i.e. lunch, bus, classroom)	585	73.09
Grouped students into cohorts that stayed together throughout the school day	372	46.49
Limited rotating staff that go into classrooms	192	24.09
Reduced class sizes	160	20.0
EXTRACURRICULAR		20.07
Regulated spectators at outside school events (i.e. sports, band concerts)	383	47.89
Cancelled outside school events	182	22.7

