



2020 Was a Horror Show. Is There Anything We Should Learn From Schools' Response?



A worldwide coronavirus pandemic. Grieving demands for racial justice. A record-breaking Atlantic hurricane season. An unprecedented presidential effort to overturn a valid election.

If nothing else, 2020 was a tumultuous year.

A new [policy brief](#) from the National Center for Research on Education and Choice (REACH) aims to make sense of the chaos, focusing in on lessons learned from the ways in which traditional schools, charter schools, voucher-receiving private schools, and rural and urban districts responded to the challenges of the pandemic and the calls for racial justice sparked by the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by police who had him in custody.

Led by NEPC Fellow [Huriya Jabbar](#) of the University of Southern California, the study described in the brief was based on 68 interviews with district, school, and community leaders, as well as 46 interviews with parents. They also conducted website, social media, and document analysis across four states (Colorado, Michigan, Louisiana, and Oregon) plus Washington, DC.

The researchers found more similarities than differences in the ways in which schools in the charter sector and in traditional public school districts responded to the year's events. Instead, responses varied in different community contexts:

Where we saw variation in pandemic responses across localities (e.g., decisions

to reopen schools for in-person learning), respondents indicated it was driven by political dynamics (e.g., state policy requirements, teacher union strength), prior governance structures (e.g., partnerships between district and charter schools), changes in competitive pressures, and geographic contexts (e.g., differences driven by urbanicity or rurality).

Responses to calls for racial justice similarly broke down along political and geographic lines, with urban and liberal areas demonstrating more experience with equity work and responding proactively, while the responses in conservative and remote areas were more likely to be reactive.

Perhaps surprisingly, the researchers found limited evidence that parents and community members influenced the racial injustice responses. Moreover, even in areas with more proactive responses, actions were “often abstract, making them largely ineffective at improving the material and structural realities of racially minoritized students.”

Although most systems and schools were not prepared for the confluence of events experienced in 2020, they were able to manage the situation with coordinated and centralized cross-sector responses. Federal and state policies that kept budgets predictable helped to avoid competitive pressures that might have complicated these efforts to cooperate, the brief’s authors noted.

For the pandemic, states like Louisiana were at an advantage because they already had well-developed coordination systems that had been put in place to manage responses to hurricanes. The brief’s authors wrote:

In responding to future health events or natural disasters, our work suggests developing policies to ensure that school systems serving a common geographic area coordinate for crisis response. This is important across the board, particularly for districts serving impoverished students, students of color, and other marginalized backgrounds. Indeed, district leaders we spoke with viewed centralization of information about health protocols and basic needs services (e.g., food, technology) as critical to their approaches to equity—to ensure that critical information and resources were available at a central location, regardless of which school or sector the families attended.

Although the events of 2020 may have been unprecedented, the brief’s authors suggest that they could be harbingers of things to come, presenting challenges and opportunities that we can learn from:

While COVID was a major shock to educational organizations across the globe, it was also clear that it was not an isolated event and that more crises were likely to come. In fact, during this research, we witnessed national and local crises on top of the pandemic, such as the national reckoning with racial injustice, hurricanes, wildfires, and an insurrection at the U.S. capitol. As such, it is essential to understand how schools and systems respond so we can design and implement changes in policy and practice that will better prepare for the future.

NEPC Resources on Politics, Policy, and School Practices

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