*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Where learning went virtual for pandemic school year**

When K-12 classes resumed in Wisconsin last fall, urban schools with greater shares of students of color were more likely to offer virtual instruction than their suburban or rural counterparts, raising concerns about the potential for widening racial achievement gaps.

As the pandemic intensified and COVID-19 cases increased from September into December, new state data also shows an increase in virtual instruction for all types of schools — particularly those in the suburbs.

These findings are based on analysis of state survey data covering about four out of every five public and private schools in Wisconsin that participate in the National School Lunch Program. The data shows that in December, 80% to 90% of responding urban schools (depending on the grade) had all or mostly virtual instruction. In contrast, 40% to 50% of suburban and 14% to 18% of rural schools responded similarly.

While school instruction across all locales became more virtual late last year, the shift was most pronounced in suburban schools. From September to December, there was a 12 percentage point increase in statewide public schools with all or mostly virtual instruction for the 12th grade (from 24.2% to 36.0%). In suburban schools, the increase was from 25.4% to 44.4%, or 19 points.

A number of factors could have influenced the approach chosen by school officials as well as parents. Those include the severity of the pandemic locally, the state of local infrastructure such as school buildings and broadband, and the preferences of district leaders and stakeholders such as parents and employees. With this research, the Wisconsin Policy Forum does not seek to evaluate the decisions made by schools and parents, but rather to document them and advance discussion about their potential impact.

Though virtual learning appears to have diminished this spring, it has continued to some degree, particularly in large urban districts. The full impacts of this shift away from in-person learning in Wisconsin are not yet known and may differ by school, student, and subject.

However, early indications raise questions about the potential effects. Along with the rise of virtual learning, some Wisconsin districts have reported substantial increases in measures of student academic failure, and national studies also point to students losing ground academically. Notably, the data analyzed here show the shift toward virtual learning disproportionately impacted students of color and students receiving free and reduced price lunch.

Schools and policymakers should consider how to examine the impacts of virtual instruction, particularly on the most vulnerable students. This may lead them to consider remediation strategies such as expanded summer school, extended school hours during afternoons or weekends, smaller class sizes, intensive tutoring, and outreach to struggling students.

School districts also are receiving a massive influx of federal relief funds in the coming months. Addressing any potential negative impacts of virtual schooling on students should be an important consideration for policymakers as they consider optimal uses for these funds.

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