Policy and Planning in the Midst of Crisis
Supporting Student Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As the COVID-19 crisis disrupted schooling, recovery efforts to ensure educational continuity in California included the adoption of Senate Bill 98, which mandated local educational agencies (LEAs) to complete Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs). These plans act as critical snapshots of sensemaking in the midst of crisis; however, their details have yet to be explored statewide, concealing the potential trends that arise in local planning when traditional schooling is disrupted by crisis. Through a multiphase, mixed methods approach, this study examines the legislative requirements of an educational policy that orchestrated large-scale local planning. Results suggest that, during a crisis, equity is centered in both policy and the plans of public school districts, threaded through accessibility to instruction as well as academic and social-emotional supports.

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Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 introduced major disruptions to schooling across the United States. In California, K–12 school districts rapidly adapted operations, suspending in-class instruction and potentially making a shift to online learning with limited time, structure, or guidance. This resulted in a concentration of efforts to support students' basic needs, such as food security and internet connectivity, while less is known about how instruction was modified or academic progress was measured that spring (Hurtt et al., 2021). In California, Senate Bill 98 (SB-98) in part aimed to address these unknowns by mandating that school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools memorialize their plans for the 2020–21 academic year. These plans, formally known as Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs), serve as both evidence of the intensive preparation undertaken by local educational agencies (LEAs) as well as mechanisms of public accountability. While prior research draws on LCPs, illuminating best practices in a single county (Romero, 2021) or identifying treatment of special populations (Gao et al., 2021; Williams & Buenrostro, 2021), the specialized nature of these studies tends to focus on a limited number of LCPs during analysis; therefore, the details of these plans have yet to be explored statewide, concealing the potential trends that arise in local planning when traditional schooling is disrupted by crisis.

This work thus proffers the first comprehensive review of public school districts' plans in California during the pandemic, highlighting the guidance that state-level policy presented to districts, the extent that districts drew on this guidance in decision-making, and the potential implications of these plans. Analysis is guided by the following questions:

- What were the intended goals of the state's crisis recovery legislation as it relates to student learning and progress?
- In responding to these goals, what intended actions and services did district LCPs describe to support student outcomes?
- Of these planned actions and services, were there differences across key district-level characteristics, including urbanicity and the proportion of English learners (ELs) and students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM)?

Drawing on a multiphase, mixed methods approach, this study examines the legislative requirements of an educational policy that orchestrated large-scale local planning and identifies both who and what was centered in decision-making. As such, it represents an important effort to extend our broader understanding of how the state, districts, and schools respond in an environment altered by crisis (Grissom & Condon, 2021).

First, we situate this research within a theoretical framework that considers the impact of crisis on decision-making in an educational context. We then review prior literature on schooling interruptions, highlighting the principal factors that emerge in support of educational continuity.

Next, we outline the data sources, which include LCPs, and the methodological approach, followed by the findings of this analysis. Finally, we discuss the implications of these results in the context of crisis and its impact on local planning.

Theoretical Framework

Distinct from a *problem*, which highlights gaps between observed and desired conditions (Rittel & Webber, 1973), a *crisis* is a gap characterized by a collective sense of uncertainty, urgency, and threat (Brinks & Ibert, 2020). In these aspects, the COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a crisis, as early uncertainties around the transmission of the virus, an urgency to act despite these unknowns, and the threat to physical, economic, and social health were underlying factors across sectors. A distinct aspect of crises, however, is that they require critical decisions to be made within a narrow band of time given limited, and possibly conflicting, information (Darling, 1994; Grissom & Condon, 2021). Therefore, despite the fact that policy prioritizes crisis (Brinks & Ibert, 2020), given its pervasive reach and the immediate attention it demands, these limitations affect how policy and plans can be crafted, as leaders must now make sense of situations as they occur (Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995) and continuously assess the efficacy of their actions and planning. Action and decision-making are thus seceded from their habitual frame of meaning and instead imparted within one bounded by interpretative sensemaking (Brinks & Ibert, 2020; SchWeber, 2008), with action being a prerequisite to produce understanding. This then requires actors to be concurrently critical, reflective, and intentional (Grissom & Condon, 2021) with their decisions, plans, and actions. How policymakers and leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore a product of continual sensemaking that is foundational to restoring the functionality of a system, such as education (Grooms & Childs, 2021). This may emerge across several recursive phases in the wake of a crisis, including *emergency*, *recovery*, and *reconstruction* (Charland et al., 2021; Grissom & Condon, 2021), thus proffering valuable mechanisms through which to understand how policy and decision-making may evolve.

First, when a crisis initially occurs, actions are immediate, often divested from a comprehensive plan, and endorsed with the goal of minimizing harm (Charland et al., 2021; Grissom & Condon, 2021). For example, during the early period of the pandemic in California, this included the sudden closure of schools (Cano & Wiener, 2020) and rush to meet students' basic needs (Buzalka, 2020). When the safety of the community is secure, plans are adjusted and continually assessed (Bishop et al., 2015), guiding sensemaking out of a state of emergency and towards one of recovery. This is characterized by efforts to reorganize and restore the educational system through temporary and, in time, sustained measures (Charland et al., 2021; Grissom & Condon, 2021). Temporary measures are intended to be provisional, reflecting a desire to return to routine, such as the swift transition to remote instruction in the spring to preserve educational continuity or the changes made to district grading policies (Blume & Agrawal, 2020).

Conversely, sustained measures address the longer-term issues that may affect education. One example of this is SB-98, passed by the California state legislature during the COVID-19 crisis, whose legislative requirements introduced measures to respond to the environment generated by the pandemic. The bill outlined, in part, what LEAs across the state were accountable for in 2020–21. This included the development of Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs), which outline the strategies LEAs intended to take to ensure learning continuity (in both remote and traditional classroom environments) and provide students with access to academic and well-being supports.

As LCPs offer a record of how districts intended to support student learning, their development suggests a turning point in sensemaking given that efforts now centered on more formally reinstating the educational components disrupted by the pandemic. LCPs thus serve as critical snapshots of educational planning across California in the midst of crisis, representing the intended changes to school operations as well as what these changes suggest in terms of what and who is valued when an umbrella of uncertainty still overhangs decision-making.

Prior Research

Educational Continuity

One of the primary ways crises affect education is through the disruption of schooling. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this included closing schools in an effort to curb the spread of the virus (Donohue & Miller, 2020), an intervention used in prior emergencies (Cauchemez et al., 2009; Stuart et al., 2013). As lost periods of schooling can have a significant impact on students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Yeşil Dağlı, 2019), educational continuity has remained a core policy focus in response to schooling interruptions, centering on access, quality, and students' well-being (Burde et al., 2015).

Access to Education. Distance learning—where students and teachers are geographically separate and learning occurs through an artificial medium (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009)—is one instructional method that may be employed during a crisis to ensure educational continuity, as instruction can be delivered synchronously (class occurs in real time), asynchronously (classes are prerecorded or work is completed offline), or in combination. However, scholars have argued that in an emergency, distance education is demonstrably different, as it is not an optional pedagogical concept but instead an obligation (Bozkurt et al., 2020). In this case, the term *emergency remote education* is ascribed (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020), as it is both compulsory and unplanned.

The literature on distance education has thus largely centered on programs that have been purposely administered, often focusing on the effectiveness of online learning in contrast

with in-person instruction (Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Means et al., 2013; Rice, 2006) and drawing on higher education contexts (Bowen et al., 2014; Xu & Jaggers, 2011). Moreover, several barriers to implementation have been identified, including course development and pedagogical strategies (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021; Pulham & Graham, 2018; Zhu et al., 2020); the availability of and access to technological infrastructure (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Fujita, 2020); and the quality of instructors and course material (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Pham et al., 2018). During emergency remote education, these challenges may be compounded; for example, while scholars (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020) suggest technology may be the most efficient method to ensure educational continuity during a crisis, students may not have adequate access to devices or internet (Cullinan et al., 2021; Thompson & Copeland, 2020).

Although distance learning is therefore one of the primary ways that access to education can be ensured in a crisis, little is known about its emergency use in a U.S. context, with studies centering on its role in developing countries (for example, Burde et al., 2015; Gulati, 2008; Komba, 2009). This may be due to the fact that during emergencies, such as natural disasters, students in the U.S. often enroll in schools in neighboring communities or states and subsequently participate in education in person (Freeman, 2007; Picou & Marshall, 2007; Tobin, 2019). One exception is the *Sloan Semester* project, which allowed students at Louisiana and Mississippi colleges to continue their education through an online database of courses in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Lorenzo, 2008). As the implementation of widespread emergency remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore unprecedented, this work seeks to extend the literature by examining its evolution through policy and local planning efforts.

Instructional Quality. In addition to access, the quality of teachers and curricula is critical to academic growth. Research conducted in traditional classroom settings confirms that teacher quality matters for student success (Gordon et al., 2006; Hairrell et al., 2011; Seebruck, 2015), and the association between curriculum quality and student development has also been well-documented (Boser et al., 2015; Partelow & Shapiro, 2018; Steiner et al., 2018). However, less is known about the relationship between instructional quality in distance education and student learning, as studies have often centered on identifying (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Esfijani, 2018; Simonson et al., 2011) or evaluating (Kay, 2018; Lowenthal & Hodges, 2015) characteristics of quality distance learning programs, such as the use of active learning techniques and reliable tools, among others (Chaney et al., 2009).

Despite this, the quality of instruction might still play a significant role in distance learning outcomes (Cavanaugh et al., 2004) given that teacher quality may be more important than instructional delivery (Means et al., 2013). In this case, scholars argue that distance education involves a different skillset than traditional teaching requires (Davis et al., 2007; Pulham & Graham, 2018), including, in part, expertise in instructional design and online systems (Bawane & Spector, 2009; Shaikh & Khoja, 2012); the ability to recognize a range of student needs (Rice & Carter, 2015); and instructional skills that blend these technical, pedagogical, and interpersonal

proficiencies (Rehn et al., 2018). As distance learning thus requires different skills, teachers need training in altering practice (Beaudoin, 1990; Muilenburg & Berge, 2015); however, these opportunities are not always available (Archambault et al., 2016) or may only focus on a subset of skills (Moore-Adams et al., 2016), particularly in an emergency (Christensen & Alexander, 2020; Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

A teacher's knowledge will therefore affect how reforms, such as an unprecedented shift to distance learning, are interpreted (Stillman, 2009), often manifesting in adaptations to curriculum and instructional practice (Boling et al., 2012; Koehler & Mishra, 2009), such as prioritizing the standards or content taught (Stillman 2009; Burde et al., 2015)—a hallmark of recent frameworks to support educational continuity during the pandemic (Myung et al., 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). While the quality of instruction thus remains critical during a crisis, ensuring this may be more of a challenge given its dependence on how teachers make sense of the rapid transition to distance education.

Student Well-Being. Beyond access and quality, a student's well-being is also paramount to success (Suldo et al., 2011; Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). This includes mental and ocial-emotional health, both of which are associated with academic performance (Davis et al., 2014; Kiuru et al., 2020; McKown et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2015) and supported by students' relationships with school staff, including counselors, as well as peers (Graham et al., 2016; Littlecott et al., 2018; Suldo et al., 2009). In fact, these relationships are critical to school connectedness (Rowe et al., 2007), which longitudinal evidence indicates is a strong predictor of well-being in adulthood (Olsson et al., 2013). Therefore, while a student's well-being is important to their overall trajectory, this can be negatively influenced by disruptions to schooling, particularly in a crisis (Campbell, 2020; Gibbs et al., 2019; Le Brocque et al., 2017). Teachers and schools more generally, then, are critical, as they can help to mitigate the influence crisis can have on students' well-being by cultivating routines (van Poortvliet et al., 2019) and reestablishing social relationships that may have been disrupted (Kataoka et al., 2012). Moreover, social-emotional learning programs—which enable students to develop the emotional and relational skills (such as self-awareness and responsible decision-making) intrinsic to later success (Allensworth et al., 2018; Denham & Brown, 2010)—can also support students' well-being, with research noting their significance beyond initial implementation (Durlak et al., 2011). These supports, though, can be more challenging to provide during distance education; for example, when instruction is mediated through a screen, fostering relationships with students may be difficult for teachers with limited knowledge on technology-mediated caring practices (Borup et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021) or for whom remote teaching is new (Rehn et al., 2018). Therefore, while well-being is central to students' development and educational continuity, ensuring that adequate supports are in place during a crisis can be a particular challenge for districts given the frequent prioritization of educational access and instruction.

Methodology

The aim of this study is twofold: (a) to investigate state policy objectives and requirements in a time of crisis and (b) to interrogate the details that arise in local implementation. To examine how state legislation supported student learning and progress during the COVID-19 pandemic, we begin with a close examination of SB-98, guided by document analysis, to establish the primary goals outlined by state education policy. Specifically, we rely on document analysis given its phenomenological approach to reviewing and evaluating documents (Bowen, 2009), enabling analysis to consider the text as well as the context within which the policy was drafted.

As a core requirement of SB-98 was the completion of LCPs, this analysis leverages data from LCPs to determine the extent to which local plans aligned with policy goals and the actions and services districts intended to implement to support students. Given that all public school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools in California were required to author, submit,[1] and upload LCPs to district or county websites prior to the start of the academic year, LCPs were available to download for data collection in October 2020.[2] This work specifically investigates the LCPs from public K–12 school districts, which include elementary school, high school, and unified school districts. In total, out of 1,025 LEAs operating in California in 2020–21, 969 were public school districts. Of these, LCPs from 958 districts were located during data collection,[3] 889 of which were computer readable.

To understand the approaches outlined in districts' LCPs to support student learning, this study leverages a multiphase, mixed methods design. Guided by the tenets of content analysis, as it assumes objective meaning (Lacity & Janson, 1994) and allows for factual evidence to be directly collected from LCPs, initial coding was conducted to identify the information included in LCPs and how detailed this information was. Preliminary analysis shaped these codes into seven categories, including instruction, assessment, attendance, special populations, meals, technology, and professional development. Given that nearly 6 million students attend schools across California, it was critical that this work capture the scope and range of detail in district planning; therefore, we conducted analysis across three phases to extend understanding through data triangulation (O'Cathain et al., 2010).

The first phase of analysis captured the breadth of districts' plans by implementing automated word counts across all computer-readable LCPs on key words and phrases (for example, "distance learning" and "hotspot").[4] We used these counts to ascertain the frequency of strategies that districts outlined in their plans, including the number of occurrences of specific words and their synonyms to avoid potentially underestimating a concept or its importance (Stemler, 2001). We then compared the frequency of these words to determine the extent to which strategies addressed by a single district also appeared in other districts' plans across the state. Table 1 presents summary statistics for the multiple populations reflected across all phases of analysis. In Phase 1, LCPs from 889 districts capture the plans intended to affect nearly 95 percent of all students in California, mirroring statewide student and district characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic and District Characteristics Across Phases of Analysis

	Statewide	Full LCP sample (Phase 1)	Unified districts (Phase 2)	Qualitative sample (Phase 3)
Total enrollment	5,992,567	5,683,086	4,118,819	287,810
Percentage of total students enrolled	100	94.8	68.7	4.8
Number of school districts	1,025	889	346	23
Characteristics of student population (percentage)				
English learners	17.7	17.8	17.4	17.5
Eligible for free/reduced-price meals	58.9	59.1	60.1	57.5
Asian American/Pacific Islander	12.4	12.6	12.9	16.8
Latinx	55.3	55.3	55.5	52.5
Black	5.2	5.1	5.7	5.3
White	21.7	21.5	20.6	19.0
Other [a]	4.6	4.6	4.5	5.9
District locale (percentage)				
Urban	16.0	15.4	17.1	13.0
Suburban	30.0	31.4	39.0	47.8
Town	16.7	16.8	21.1	26.1
Rural	34.3	33.6	22.8	13.0

Note. Data points calculated based on publicly available data sets from the California Department of Education (cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/downloadabledata.asp) and the National Center for Education Statistics (nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/SchoolLocations).
[a] Other includes Native American and multiracial students.

The second phase of analysis investigated the depth of local plans through a deductive qualitative approach. Following initial coding, we organized questions that targeted district planning into domains of inquiry (Namey et al., 2008) to develop data collection tools that teams of undergraduate research assistants then used to collaboratively code LCPs from all unified school districts (N = 346).[5] As unified districts in California operate both elementary and secondary schools, serving nearly 70 percent of K–12 students, this phase of analysis centered on plans from these districts given their potential to affect a large proportion of the state's students.

Finally, to extract contextual detail and enrich understanding of districts' actions and strategies in planning, the third phase of analysis involved an in-depth reading of LCPs identified through purposive sampling during Phase 2 of analysis. These LCPs were strategically selected to pinpoint unique or diverse variations included in local plans. Additionally, in selecting these plans, we aimed to identify a sample of districts that was representative both demographically and geographically. In all, analysis included LCPs from 23 unified districts serving 287,810 students, drawing on an inductive coding approach to unearth additional themes that may have been masked by prior phases of analysis. Results therefore include tiered analysis of LCPs across a

range of factors, drawing on automated word counts from a majority of public school districts in California, deductive coding from all unified districts, and a close qualitative analysis of selected plans to triangulate and further explicate findings.

This study also attends to emergent differences across key district-level demographics, including locale,[6] the percentage of students eligible for FRPMs under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP),[7] and the proportion of students in a district identified as ELs.[8] We focus on these characteristics given historic concerns around equitable access to resources for students in rural (Showalter et al., 2019) and less affluent areas (Reardon et al., 2018). Moreover, we examine district differences across the proportion of FRPM and EL students, as districts serving greater populations of these students receive more funding from the state through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF; Bruno, 2018). To identify these differences, we conducted two-tailed *t*-tests that allowed for unequal variances to test whether observed differences were statistically significant.

Findings

In the following findings we discuss the results of this analysis in two parts. First, we present the goals outlined in SB-98 to determine the foci of educational policy during a crisis. We then turn to analysis of LCPs to illuminate the actions and services included in local plans and the emergent differences across key district-level characteristics.

California's Crisis Recovery Legislation

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, SB-98 was a K–12 education finance trailer bill that encompassed a variety of actions and supports related to school funding for the 2020–21 academic year. Here, we focused on the eight sections that specifically addressed learning, characterized by references to either instructional or assessment policy changes for public school districts. Analysis identified four core policy goals: (a) expand the definition of instruction, (b) ensure continuity of learning, (c) evaluate and support student progress, and (d) address the tensions placed on student learning. Broadly, SB-98 addressed students' instructional needs while providing districts with the flexibility to do so as a global pandemic completely altered the context of learning.

Goal 1: Expand the Definition of Instruction. While a fundamental characteristic of education during the pandemic included distance learning, prior to the addition of Education Code (EDC) Part 24.5 in SB-98, no formal description or guidance had been offered by the state. Given the ways in which education changed with the closure of schools, policy changes in SB-98 suggest that one of the primary goals related to student learning was an expansion of what instruction entailed in 2020–21 for the purposes of both standardization and apportionment. In terms of standardization, this included (a) defining distance learning [EDC 43500(a)],[9] acknowledging that instruction and learning may occur outside a physical classroom; (b) specifying the circumstances

and requirements for districts to offer distance learning programs [EDC 43503], setting minimum standards for its instruction; and (c) supporting future instruction by allocating funds to develop distance learning curricula and instructional guidance[10] for mathematics, English language arts (ELA), and English language development (ELD) [SB-98 § 121].[11] The definition of instruction was also expanded for apportionment purposes; in California, as schools must comply with instructional day requirements, EDC 43502(c) extended this to include in-person instruction, distance learning, or a combination of the two.

Goal 2: Ensure Continuity of Learning. Given the uncertainties related to student learning and progress during the early period of school closures, a clear goal of SB-98 centered on ensuring "continuity of learning" [EDC 43509(e)] by directing school districts to outline their instructional plans in LCPs [EDC 43509], highlighting students' access to learning opportunities, the quality of these opportunities, and the frequency of their access. For example, access to learning opportunities included "in-person instructional offerings" [EDC 43509(f)(1)(A)] and distance learning [EDC 43509(f)(1)(B)], which districts were required to prepare for jointly as well as note how they intended to support students from special populations. Moreover, with distance learning contingent on the availability of technological resources, districts needed to describe how "adequate" device and connectivity access [EDC 43503(b)(1)] would be provided [EDC 43509(f)(1)(B)(ii)]. In terms of quality, districts were also directed to guarantee distance learning content would be "at a level of quality and intellectual challenge substantially equivalent to in-person instruction" [EDC 43503(b)(2)]. Both instruction and curricula should therefore be of a similar standard, regardless of instructional delivery, potentially easing moves between in-person instruction and distance learning.

While access to and the quality of learning opportunities are paramount, the frequency with which students are able to (or are choosing to) access these opportunities is central to continuity of learning and gauging student progress. In this case, a lower rate of accessing learning opportunities (frequent absences) might suggest a greater gap in students' standards-level progress, often denoted as "learning loss" in the text of SB-98 [EDC 43509(f)(1)(A)]. Therefore, in the case of student absence, particularly in terms of distance learning, EDC 43509(f)(1)(F) required districts to develop tiered reengagement strategies, including how districts would outreach to students and families. This could include the verification of contact information, daily notification of absence to parents, or outreach to determine additional student needs, such as connecting with health and social services [EDC 43504(f)(2)].

Goal 3: Evaluate and Support Student Progress. While efforts were undoubtedly made across the state to ensure minimal interruption to students' learning, missed instructional time (whether in person or remote) may have negatively affected student's academic progress during spring 2020. Characterized as "learning loss" [EDC 43509(f)(1)(A)], this was a particular policy concern, as districts were directed to (a) assess potential gaps in student learning as a result of COVID-19, specifically in ELA, ELD, and mathematics [EDC 43509(f)(1)(C)(i)]; (b) address these

gaps by describing strategies to enact that "accelerate learning progress" [EDC 43509(f)(1)(C)(ii)]; and (c) gauge the effectiveness of these strategies [EDC 43509(f)(1)(C)(iii)]. Additionally, to ensure that resources were available, funds were specifically provided to districts for activities that "directly support pupil academic achievement and mitigate learning loss related to COVID-19 school closures" [SB-98 § 110(d)]. "Activities" in this case included expanding or enhancing learning supports, extending the instructional school year, or offering supplementary support services, reflecting a policy focus on the development and implementation of plans to address potential learning loss.

Goal 4: Address the Tensions Placed on Student Learning. SB-98 also attended to the tensions placed on student learning at this time. Given the health and economic concerns ushered in by the pandemic and the potential trauma experienced by students, learning may have taken a backseat to more pressurizing events. The text of the policy accounted for this, directing districts to support the mental health and social and emotional well-being of students and staff [EDC 43509(f)(1)(D)] and describe the resources districts would offer "to address trauma and other impacts of COVID-19 on the school community" [EDC 43509(f)(1)(E)] in their LCPs. Moreover, as distance learning primarily takes place "through ... a computer or communications technology" [EDC 43500(a)(1)], altering social engagement—including how relationships are built between students and staff—SB-98 indicated that distance learning should include live interaction to, in part, "maintain school connectedness" [EDC 43503(b)(6)], ensuring that a sense of belonging is crafted even if the classroom setting looks radically different than it would during in-person instruction.

In all, the goals of SB-98 reflect a holistic view of student learning, including how it should be measured and supported as well as the challenges presented to both by the pandemic. This suggests that, in the midst of crisis, education policy centers on the persistence of academic progress and how that progress is assessed, and it confronts the ever-changing context wrought by crisis in its potential to affect student learning.

Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs)

A key mandate of SB-98 was the completion of LCPs, but similar state-directed local planning requirements have previously been put in place in California. In fact, since the enactment of the LCFF in 2013, which changed how funding was allocated and the ways the state would support underperforming school districts (Bruno, 2018; Koppich & Humphrey, 2018), districts in California have been required to submit Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). These plans include short- and long-term district goals, incorporate input from important stakeholders in the community (that is, parents and students), and outline the actions, services, and expenditures that districts plan to take to support students, reflecting a bottom-up approach to accountability in that districts retain primary jurisdiction over decision-making.

However, as health guidelines shifted during the pandemic, so did state requirements. Traditionally, districts are mandated to annually update and submit LCAPs by July 1. However, amid

school closures and health safety concerns, Executive Order (EO) N-56-20, signed in April 2020, eased the normal deadline for these updates to December 15, 2020, and directed districts to report any adaptations made to operations. Despite this extension, rising concerns about student progress ushered in the adoption of SB-98 in June 2020, superseding EO N-56-20 and suspending LCAP updates, instead requiring districts to complete and adopt LCPs by September 30, 2020. LCPs, then, formalize the written report mandated by the executive order and closely mirror LCAPs in several key ways, including their requirements to engage with community stakeholders and publicly post plans to district or county websites.

Further, similar to the LCAP, SB-98 also required the State Board of Education (SBE) to adopt an LCP template[12] for LEAs to use to record their plans. Although school districts were not required to use the template, except to include "all of the information [it] specified" [EDC 43509(e)], analysis indicates that out of 958 public school districts, only six did not formally use the provided template, which includes specific headers for key subgroups of students. As nearly all districts utilized this template in their planning, plans directly aligned with the priorities outlined in SB-98; however, the use of a structured document for planning may have also affected the shape and form of the plans themselves, as wide variation was present across LCPs, in terms of both length (7–363 pages, $M = 21$) and detail.

In an effort to capture the fullest picture of local plans developed amid crisis and the unique features presented within these plans, the following leverages an integrative approach, situating results within the goals identified in SB-98 that steered LCP development: (a) ensure continuity of learning, (b) evaluate and support student progress, and (c) address the tensions placed on student learning. First, we note results from statewide automated counts to report the frequency of concepts across LCPs. We then discuss results from unified districts, summarizing strategies that potentially affected a majority of students in California. Additionally, when relevant, we highlight specific actions and services described in LCPs to contextualize analysis and supplement quantitative results.

Ensure Continuity of Learning. One of the primary areas of focus within LCPs was instruction, particularly its access, as districts outlined flexible and strategic instructional plans, prioritized technological resources, and intended to monitor student engagement, suggesting access to instruction in 2020–21 encompassed a spectrum of resources and logistical considerations beyond those in a traditional school year.

Method of Instruction. At the center of access to instruction is how it will occur, as LCPs described *flexible and strategic instructional plans* to support students' learning. Table 2 presents results from the automated word counts of public school districts and coding of unified districts in terms of instructional method. Findings reveal that distance learning plans were overwhelmingly included in LCPs, cited at similar rates both statewide and within unified school districts. Moreover, negligible differences across district characteristics indicate that all districts, to varying degrees, noted distance education during planning.

Table 2. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Instructional Method (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide[a]	Unified districts									
		All	Rural	Urban	Diff.	Low FRPM	High FRPM	Diff.	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Distance learning	98.0	98.8	98.0	99.0	0.7	98.0	99.5	0.7	98.7	99.0	0.7
Synchronous learning		99.4	98.7	100.0	0.7	100.0	99.0	0.5	100.0	99.0	0.5
Asynchronous learning		95.4	91.4	98.5	6.4***	95.9	95.0	0.5	93.3	96.9	4.1*
Instructional minutes by day of the week		27.5	23.7	30.4	6.2	30.6	25.1	5.7	29.3	26.3	4.2
Specific plan for at least one student group		96.2	95.4	96.9	0.9	98.6	94.5	3.7**	99.3	93.8	5.0***
English learners		94.8	92.1	96.9	4.2*	98.0	92.5	5.0**	97.3	93.8	3.0
Youth in foster care		89.6	83.6	94.3	10.2***	90.5	88.9	1.1	90.0	89.7	0.2
Youth experiencing homelessness		86.4	78.9	92.3	12.3***	87.1	85.9	1.3	87.3	85.6	0.9
Migrant youth		6.4	5.9	6.7	0.8	6.1	6.5	0.5	0.7	10.8	10.4***
Eligible for FRPM		2.0	2.6	1.5	3.1	2.0	2.0	1.0	2.0	2.1	0.0
Students with disabilities		90.5	86.2	93.8	7.1**	93.2	88.4	4.3	91.3	89.7	1.2
Hybrid learning	79.0	87.0	83.6	89.7	6.0	88.4	85.9	1.8	87.3	86.6	1.0
Structured schedule		52.3	48.7	55.2	6.4	56.5	49.2	7.5	56.7	49.5	7.4
Half-day schedule [b]		6.6	3.9	8.8	6.1**	8.2	5.5	3.8	11.3	3.1	9.6***
2–3-day alternating schedule [c]		6.6	9.2	4.6	4.5	6.8	6.5	0.6	7.3	6.2	1.6
2–3-day grouped schedule [d]		21.1	21.7	20.6	0.4	21.1	21.1	1.0	20.0	22.2	2.1
Priority for in-person/hybrid instruction		52.3	48.0	55.7	7.6	54.4	50.8	3.2	49.3	54.1	5.4
Grade level		11.6	7.2	14.9	7.7**	10.2	12.6	2.4	8.0	13.4	5.5
Students with low attendance		1.7	0.7	2.6	1.9	2.0	1.5	0.5	1.3	2.1	0.7
English learners		34.4	29.6	38.1	8.3	38.1	31.7	6.8	34.7	34.5	0.0
Youth in foster care		26.9	19.7	32.5	12.5***	27.9	26.1	1.8	26.7	27.3	0.9
Youth experiencing homelessness		24.9	18.4	29.9	11.2**	24.5	25.1	0.6	24.0	25.8	2.0
Migrant youth		1.2	0.7	1.5	0.9	0.7	1.5	0.8	0.0	2.1	2.1**
Eligible for FRPM		13.0	9.2	16.0	6.7*	15.0	11.6	3.3	14.0	12.4	1.6
Students with disabilities		38.2	32.9	42.3	9.2*	42.9	34.7	8.0	37.3	39.2	2.0
Option to continue distance learning		28.6	25.0	31.4	6.8	31.3	26.6	4.9	30.7	27.3	3.5
N	889	346	152	194		147	199		150	194	

Notes on next page.

Note. EL = English learner; FRPM = free or reduced-priced meals.

[a] Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, please see the Appendix.

[b] In a half-day schedule, one cohort of students is on campus in the morning while the other attends in the afternoon.

[c] In an alternating schedule, specified cohorts of students attend class in person on alternating days of the week (for example, Monday/Wednesday).

[d] In a grouped schedule, specified cohorts of students are on campus on grouped days of the week (for example, Monday/Tuesday).

***p < 0.01. **p < 0.05. *p < 0.1.

Distance learning plans also described the use of both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Results from unified districts reveal that while overall these methods were included at similar rates, synchronous instruction was cited slightly more often than asynchronous learning; however, for districts in urban areas with higher proportions of EL students, asynchronous instruction was more likely to be cited in LCPs. A possible explanation for this may lie in differentiation strategies, particularly for EL students, who could have received additional instructional support during periods when other students were working independently. Nearly all unified districts (96 percent) also included distance learning plans for specific student populations, with ELs at the forefront (95 percent) and more likely to be noted in the plans from urban, higher income districts.

In addition to distance learning, a majority of districts planned to implement hybrid learning models (where in-person instruction is typically alternated between cohorts of students), with unified districts (87 percent) noting these models at higher rates than results statewide (79 percent). Moreover, more than half (52 percent) of all unified districts included structured cohort schedules in their planning, where qualitative analysis revealed deep variation in their design, including schedules that group days for in-person learning,[13] half days,[14] and alternating schedules.[15] Twenty-one percent of unified districts noted grouped schedules in their plans compared to half-days (7 percent) and alternating schedules (7 percent), a potential reflection of the realities of maintaining student and staff safety during the pandemic due to the frequent cleaning that in-person instruction would require.

District plans also prioritized student groups in returns to campus for in-person instruction. Fifty-two percent of unified districts proffered priority for at least one student group, including students with disabilities (38 percent), youth in foster care (27 percent), and youth experiencing homelessness (25 percent), as well as FRPM students (13 percent). Grade level was also considered in determining priority for in-person instruction, with closer analysis suggesting that districts often targeted students in elementary grades, likely because routines of schooling are still new and distance education requires intensive parental supervision.

Technological Resources. Most districts also prioritized *technological resources* to support engagement with instruction and ensure equitable access to distance education. Findings indicate that a majority of districts across California noted technological devices in their planning (see Table 3); similarly, in nearly every unified district, devices or subsidies were offered—often in conjunction with one-to-one initiatives that would provide devices (such as

Chromebooks or iPads) to all students. In fact, for districts that had previously implemented such programs, closer analysis suggests these programs likely eased transitions to distance education; for example, the techEQUITY program in Santa Barbara had previously assigned iPads to students in Grades 3–12, allowing the district to later expand this program to earlier grades. Relatedly, as the rapid shift to online learning saw an increase in device orders (Rauf, 2020), LCPs also noted backorders that may have affected one-to-one initiatives, prompting device prioritization. In this case, in many unified districts, particularly those in urban areas, certain student groups were prioritized[16] to receive devices.

Results also reveal the investment districts made to increase connectivity for students, as 98 percent of unified districts intended to offer supports to students for internet services, a rate slightly higher than plans statewide (92 percent). Qualitative analysis indicates that these supports included a range of options, such as hotspots (for example, Verizon Mi-Fi) and Wi-Fi extenders, to improve instructional access. In Gateway, district plans outlined a multipronged approach, highlighting the purchase of iPhones (for use as hotspots), a partnership with internet provider Spectrum, and the deployment of buses equipped with Wi-Fi. Similar to devices, connectivity supports were also prioritized across student groups, often in urban areas, with 74 percent of unified districts offering supports for broadband infrastructure to at least one student group, notably FRPM students and youth in foster care.

Table 3. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Technological Resources (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide[a]	Unified districts									
		All	**Rural**	**Urban**	**Diff.**	**Low FRPM**	**High FRPM**	**Diff.**	**Low EL**	**High EL**	**Diff.**
Technological devices	93.0										
Support or subsidy offered		99.4	99.3	99.5	0.0	100.0	99.0	0.0	100.0	99.0	0.0
Any student can receive a device		96.0	95.4	96.4	0.2	96.6	95.5	0.8	96.7	95.4	0.2
Priority given in distribution		68.0	60.5	74.2	13.6***	67.3	68.8	2.0	70.0	67.0	3.4
Grade level		3.5	3.9	3.1	0.9	2.0	4.5	2.5	2.0	4.6	2.7
Students with low attendance		1.2	0.7	1.5	0.9	1.4	1.0	0.4	2.0	0.5	1.5
English learners		49.3	45.4	52.6	7.1	44.9	52.8	8.3	51.3	48.5	3.2
Youth in foster care		61.7	52.6	69.1	16.5***	59.9	63.3	3.9	61.3	62.9	1.3
Youth experiencing homelessness		39.5	33.6	44.3	10.8**	41.5	38.2	3.1	40.7	38.7	2.2
Migrant youth		9.2	9.9	8.8	1.2	9.5	9.0	0.4	10.0	8.8	1.3
Eligible for FRPM		59.9	54.6	64.4	9.7*	60.5	59.8	0.4	66.0	56.2	10.3*
Students with disabilities		6.9	3.3	9.8	6.6**	8.2	6.0	2.1	6.0	7.7	1.7
Internet connectivity	92.0										
Support or subsidy offered		98.3	97.4	99.0	1.3	99.3	97.5	1.0	99.3	97.4	1.0
Priority given in distribution		73.8	68.4	78.4	9.8**	74.1	73.9	0.6	77.3	71.6	6.0
Grade level		0.9	1.3	0.5	0.8	1.4	0.5	0.9	1.3	0.5	0.8
Students with low attendance		0.9	0.7	1.0	0.4	0.0	1.5	1.5*	1.3	0.5	0.8
English learners		50.4	50.0	51.0	1.2	46.9	53.3	5.9	50.0	51.5	1.1
Youth in foster care		63.7	57.2	69.1	12.2**	62.6	64.8	1.6	62.0	66.0	3.4
Youth experiencing homelessness		8.1	8.6	7.7	0.8	7.5	8.5	1.0	7.3	8.8	1.4
Migrant youth		44.4	40.8	47.4	6.8	44.2	44.7	0.0	44.0	44.8	0.4
Eligible for FRPM		63.1	57.9	67.5	9.6*	63.3	63.3	0.2	68.0	60.3	8.0
Students with disabilities		6.3	6.6	6.2	0.4	5.4	7.0	1.6	5.3	7.2	1.8
N	889	346	152	194		147	199		150	194	

Note. EL = English learner; FRPM = free or reduced-priced meals.

[a] Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, please see the Appendix.

***p < 0.01. **p < 0.05. *p < 0.1.

Table 4. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Attendance and Engagement (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide[a]	Unified districts									
		All	Rural	Urban	Diff.	Low FRPM	High FRPM	Diff.	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Monitor attendance	44.0	98.8	98.0	99.5	0.7	98.6	99.0	0.5	99.3	98.5	0.5
Synchronous instruction		92.2	90.8	93.3	1.7	91.8	92.5	0.3	91.3	93.3	1.1
Asynchronous work		74.1	69.1	77.8	8.6*	73.5	74.4	0.6	70.0	77.3	7.2
Engagement strategies											
Tiered levels of engagement described		88.8	84.9	92.3	6.3*	91.2	87.4	2.8	89.3	88.7	0.8
Tier 1		86.7	83.6	89.7	4.5	88.4	85.9	2.2	88.7	85.6	3.9
Tier 2		81.3	76.3	85.6	7.6*	83.0	80.4	3.5	82.0	80.9	2.9
Tier 3		68.6	63.2	73.2	8.7*	70.1	67.8	3.0	70.0	68.0	3.5
Intensive reengagement strategies	59.0										
Procedures in the event of absence		95.7	94.7	96.9	1.4	96.6	95.5	0.8	97.3	94.8	2.2
Automated phone call		25.1	17.8	30.9	12.6***	25.2	25.1	0.0	18.7	29.9	11.2**
Email from teacher		58.2	55.3	60.8	4.1	64.6	53.8	10.5*	61.3	56.2	5.4
Personal phone call from teacher		66.3	64.5	68.0	1.4	70.1	63.8	6.2	68.0	65.5	3.2
Personal phone call from district staff		82.1	79.6	84.5	2.8	81.6	82.9	2.0	84.0	81.4	2.8
Virtual conference with teacher/staff		41.5	36.8	45.4	7.5	40.8	42.2	1.2	36.7	45.4	8.2
Home visit from district staff		56.2	53.9	58.2	3.1	51.0	60.3	9.5*	52.0	59.8	6.6
N	889	346	152	194		147	199		150	194	

Note. EL = English learner; FRPM = free or reduced-priced meals.
[a] Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, please see the Appendix.
***p < 0.01. **p < 0.05. *p < 0.1.

Attendance and Engagement. Beyond the resources students need to access instruction, the frequency of this access was also noted in LCPs, which described *diverse monitoring plans* for attendance that included students' presence and participation as evidence. Table 4 presents results in terms of attendance and engagement. Across all school districts, 44 percent specifically noted attendance monitoring in their planning, most of which were unified districts. Moreover, while nearly all unified districts intended to track attendance during synchronous instruction, a majority (74 percent) also noted asynchronous work would be used, underscoring the prevalence of both methods and the flexibility that was incorporated into planning.

In addition to monitoring attendance, SB-98 mandated districts to develop tiered strategies for reengagement if a student's absence extended beyond three school days. Although statewide, 56 percent of LCPs described more intensive reengagement strategies, which include referrals to attendance review boards, these strategies were typically relegated to Tier 3—the highest tier level—to support students with chronic absenteeism. Additionally, results from unified districts indicate that Tier 1 (87 percent) and Tier 2 (81%) were described at marginally higher rates than Tier 3 (69 percent),[17] suggesting that districts prioritized early intervention strategies and intended to understand potential barriers to instruction students might experience prior to reaching Tier 3.

Evaluate and Support Student Progress. LCPs also noted the use of data from multiple assessments to evaluate students' progress. While plans outlined clear roles for these data, such as identifying students' strengths, adjusting instruction, and informing stakeholders, at the forefront of these plans was the use of assessments to measure students' academic development, underscoring the importance of where students are in their learning, where they may still need to go, and the strategies to best support this progress.

Academic Progress. In their planning, districts indicated a *narrowed academic focus*, prioritizing essential learning standards and subjects to capture the "most important subject matter during distance learning" (McFarland Unified School District, 2020, p. 9). This focus centered on mathematics and English—mirroring the core subjects highlighted in SB-98. Table 5 presents statewide and unified district results in terms of academic content. Findings from unified districts reveal that math instruction and the administration of math assessments were cited at similar rates, while English assessments were also widely mandated (91 percent). Further, math and ELA assessments were more likely to be noted in districts with higher proportions of EL students, suggesting that these districts may have placed additional attention on testing to determine EL students' progress given disruptions to testing the prior spring (Gewertz, 2020).

Table 5. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Academic Content (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide[a]	Unified districts									
		All	Rural	Urban	Diff.	Low FRPM	High FRPM	Diff.	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Mathematics											
Instruction addressed		92.5	87.5	96.4	9.3***	92.5	92.5	0.3	92.0	92.8	0.0
Mandated assessments		89.6	86.2	92.3	5.0*	91.2	88.4	2.3	85.3	92.8	5.2**
English language arts (ELA)											
Mandated assessments		91.3	88.2	93.8	5.4**	93.2	89.9	3.0	88.0	93.8	4.4*
Science	70.0										
Instruction addressed		53.5	44.1	60.8	19.7***	58.5	49.7	10.6*	49.3	56.7	6.9
Mandated assessments		6.1	5.3	6.7	1.6	6.1	6.0	0.0	4.7	7.2	2.7
N	889	346	152	194		147	199		150	194	

Note. EL = English learner; FRPM = free or reduced-priced meals.
[a] Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, please see the Appendix.
***$p < 0.01$. **$p < 0.05$. *$p < 0.1$.

Although not identified in SB-98, science was also emphasized in LCPs. Statewide, 70 percent of districts noted science in their planning, while over half of all unified districts, primarily those in urban areas, cited science instruction. Closer analysis indicates that the science curricula described by unified districts were varied. For example, while Mystery Science (a K–5 science curriculum) and Amplify Science (a K–8 science curriculum) were frequently highlighted, districts also planned to offer virtual labs and other localized programs, such as Ukiah's Redwood Valley Outdoor Education Project (RVOEP).[18] However, science assessments were cited less frequently and typically noted tangentially in addition to math and ELA.

Assessment Administration. LCPs also described *holistic assessment plans* that incorporated multiple measures to assess students' academic progress, including (a) diagnostic (to determine prior knowledge and skills), (b) formative (to monitor learning as it occurs), and (c) summative assessments (to evaluate what has been learned). Statewide evidence indicates that most school districts across California highlighted formative (87 percent) and diagnostic (64 percent) assessments in their planning (see Table 6). Moreover, these assessments received more detail in LCPs, perhaps in response to grading changes at the end of the prior academic year that potentially concealed students' academic growth; in this case, knowledge of student progress was of even greater importance for 2020–21, cementing the use of assessments to diagnose and understand students' standards-level development. As a little under half of public school districts (46 percent) referenced summative assessments, this may indicate a shift away from comprehensive exams due to the uncertainties introduced by COVID-19.

Table 6. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Assessment (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide[a]	Unified districts									
		All	Rural	Urban	Diff.	Low FRPM	High FRPM	Diff.	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Assessment administration											
Assessments mandated by the district		97.1	97.4	96.9	0.1	98.6	96.0	2.4*	95.3	98.5	3.5**
Plan outlined		87.9	84.2	90.7	8.7***	88.4	87.4	0.3	87.3	88.1	1.7
Assessment calendar referenced	19.0	30.9	23.0	37.1	14.9***	31.3	30.7	0.8	29.3	32.0	2.5
Assessments listed		93.9	94.1	93.8	2.0	91.2	96.0	1.2	90.7	96.4	4.6**
Grade level		51.4	40.1	60.3	24.1***	53.7	49.7	8.7	48.0	54.6	3.9
English learners [b]		81.8	73.0	88.7	13.0***	83.7	80.4	2.5	74.0	88.7	13.0***
Youth in foster care		59.2	53.9	63.4	9.7*	57.1	60.8	2.9	54.7	62.9	7.7
Youth experiencing homelessness		45.4	40.8	49.0	7.6	44.9	45.7	0.6	43.3	46.9	3.4
Migrant youth		2.0	0.7	3.1	2.4*	3.4	1.0	2.4	2.0	2.1	0.1
Eligible for FRPM		59.0	57.2	60.3	3.1	58.5	59.3	0.8	55.3	61.3	6.0
Students with disabilities		53.2	39.5	63.9	24.4***	54.4	52.3	2.2	51.3	54.1	2.8
Types of assessment											
Diagnostic	64.0										
Formative	87.0										
Summative	46.0										
N	889	346	152	194		147	199		150	194	

Note. EL = English learner; FRPM = free or reduced-priced meals.
[a] Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, please see the Appendix.
[b] Assessments for EL students do not include the state-mandated English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC).
***$p < 0.01$. **$p < 0.05$. *$p < 0.1$.

Assessment plans were also differentiated across student groups, particularly for ELs. Eighty-two percent of unified districts highlighted how ELs' academic progress would be determined, with urban districts and, unsurprisingly, those with higher proportions of EL students about 13 percentage points more likely to list the assessments that would be administered. In fact, beyond assessments mandated by the state,[19] districts planned to draw on a range of strategies to evaluate EL students, including embedded assessments from the curricula of major publishers, such as Wonders (McGraw-Hill); student writing samples; and tools to assess oral language skills (for example, the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix).

Address the Tensions Placed on Student Learning. Beyond instructional continuity and the evaluation of students' academic progress, LCPs considered how the COVID-19 crisis affected students beyond academics. Districts noted the challenges students experienced during the prior spring, such as feelings of social isolation and concerns about contracting the virus, which placed additional strains on learning. Planning therefore considered the continued impact of the pandemic on students' well-being, as districts intended to establish supportive schooling environments and offer holistic supports.

Establish Supportive Schooling Environments. One of the primary ways districts attended to the challenges and stressors of distance learning during the pandemic was with an explicit intent to *establish supportive schooling environments.* Statewide findings indicate that 27 percent of districts specifically referenced school climate or school culture in their plans (see Table 7), suggesting that, for some districts, focalized attention was given to the quality and character of schools in general and not just procedurally. This included the application of positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS),[20] cited at slightly higher rates statewide (37 percent). Thirty-five percent of districts also intended to establish ways for students (and families) to connect with staff, presenting opportunities to do so in the form of office hours or the use of communication apps such as Remind or ClassDojo). Notably, 65 percent of unified districts planned to reach out to families beyond attendance, suggesting communication outside of traditional outreach was anticipated in many districts.

Table 7. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to School Climate (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide[a]	Unified districts									
		All	Rural	Urban	Diff.	Low FRPM	High FRPM	Diff.	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Strengthen student-staff relationships											
Connect outside class		35.4	33.6	37.1	3.3	36.7	34.7	2.0	33.3	37.1	3.9
Outreach beyond attendance		64.6	55.3	72.2	15.4***	66.7	63.3	2.1	64.0	66.0	2.6
Schooling environment	27.0										
Behavior supports	37.0										
N	889	346	152	194		147	199		150	194	

Note. EL = English learner; FRPM = free or reduced-priced meals.
[a] Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, please see the Appendix.
***$p < 0.01$. **$p < 0.05$. *$p < 0.1$.

Mental Health Supports. LCPs also described resources and programs through which students' well-being would be supported. Table 8 presents statewide and unified district results in terms of *mental health supports*. Evidence indicates that, across California, school districts overwhelmingly cited mental health services in LCPs, including nearly all unified districts. These services included, in part, mindfulness practices as well as days dedicated to student wellness—noted by 42 percent of districts in the state. Moreover, while 77 percent of unified districts' plans indicated that students would have individual access to school counselors, these supports were more likely to be present in urban, higher income areas. Districts outlined a range of supports for students in addition to mental health, including check-ins around potential academic, technological, social-emotional, and physical needs, along with the creation of new programs, such as the Virtual Tutoring and Wellness Center outlined by Natomas.

Table 8. Specific Strategies from District LCPs Related to Student Well-Being (Percentage Reporting)

	Statewide[a]	Unified districts									
		All	Rural	Urban	Diff.	Low FRPM	High FRPM	Diff.	Low EL	High EL	Diff.
Mental health services	90.0	95.1	92.1	97.4	3.5	96.6	94.0	1.2	94.7	95.4	1.1
Access to school counselors	76.7	70.4	81.4	10.1**	82.3	72.4	9.4**	77.3	76.3	1.3	3.9
Mindfulness practices	42.0										
Social-emotional learning	82.0										
Instructional time	82.4	77	86.6	8.4**	84.4	80.9	3.0	82.0	82.5	0.1	
Monitor wellness	28.0										
N	889	346	152	194		147	199		150	194	

Note. EL = English learner; FRPM = free or reduced-priced meals.
[a] Statewide results are based on findings from automated word searches. For exact terms searched, please see the Appendix.
***p < 0.01. **p < 0.05. *p < 0.1.

Social-Emotional Learning. Enfolded within districts' plans to support well-being was a *focus on social-emotional learning* (SEL). Statewide, 82 percent of districts noted SEL in their LCPs; however, less than one third (28 percent) cited plans to monitor wellness through surveys or universal SEL screeners, such as CoVitality (see Table 8). Districts also planned to determine social-emotional support needs in other ways, including online referral systems as well as device (for example, GoGuardian) and social media monitoring tools (for example, NewDawn) that alert staff if students are exploring content related to mental health or suicide ideation. Moreover, SEL supports were often blended within instruction, as 82 percent of unified districts outlined distance learning schedules that devoted instructional time specifically to SEL, usually organized around a certain curriculum (for example, CharacterStrong or Healthy Living Lessons) that may differ by grade level.

Discussion and Conclusion

This work proffers the first comprehensive review of LCPs in California during the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting the guidance that state-level policy presented and the extent that districts drew on this guidance to support educational continuity. Analysis indicates that SB-98 reflected a holistic view of student learning, including the challenges presented by the pandemic. Moreover, district LCPs echoed policy as well as the needs of students, outlining educational contingency plans that were both "proactive and reactive" (McFarland Unified School District, 2020, p. 16)—demonstrating the recursive, interpretative sensemaking demanded of education leaders during this time. These results suggest that, during a crisis, equity is centered in policy and planning, particularly in terms of accessibility to both academic and social-emotional supports.

Given that educational continuity was a particular focus within SB-98, district LCPs described a range of resources attending to how students would access quality learning opportunities during distance education. Access to instruction and related supports inherently hinged on the availability of and access to technological tools. While results indicate that districts statewide intended to expand access to these critical resources for students, backorders due to the global increase in demand more than likely led to device prioritization; however, results from unified districts indicate that those most often prioritized to receive laptop or internet connectivity supports were those with the greatest need, including FRPM students and youth in foster care. Evidence suggests that districts serving the majority of the state's K–12 students habitually focused planning efforts on student groups for whom device access may have been a hardship, underscoring the focus on equity threaded throughout LCPs and district planning more generally. Moreover, these results echo prior research noting challenges in the access and availability of technology during a crisis (Cullinan et al., 2021; Thompson & Copeland, 2020), emphasizing the need to consider these challenges in early planning and preparation efforts for extended school closures.

As SB-98 also mandated districts to evaluate potential gaps in student learning, LCPs placed considerable focus on diagnostic and formative assessments, suggesting that educators planned to pay careful attention to how students were both commencing and progressing throughout a nontraditional school year given the unknowns that surrounded student progress during the prior spring. Moreover, at the time of publication, the state's annual testing program had been suspended for two years.[21] Given that assessment results are a key input in various federal and state-level accountability measures, along with the uncertain future of widespread, reliable testing data in a pandemic context to support the efficacy of these systems, accountability efforts both statewide and nationally could consider alternative or supplementary outcomes to examine how districts and schools are meeting student needs over the long term instead of the continuance of transient flexibility options.

Findings also reveal a distinct contrast between urban and rural districts across nearly all areas of analysis, including science instruction, assessment plans, family outreach, and access to counselors, with urban areas indicating these in their plans at significantly higher rates. These differences may be a result of inequities that existed prior to the pandemic, as rural districts often face staffing challenges (Goldhaber et al., 2020; McVey & Trinidad, 2019; Nguyen, 2020) due to a variety of factors, such as added licensure requirements, lower relative pay, and location itself. In fact, recent scholarship indicates that in California, rural districts contend with significantly higher vacancy rates and employ more emergency-credentialed teachers compared to urban districts (Goldhaber et al., 2020), presenting evidence that distance education in 2020–21 may have placed greater strains on rural staff in addition to those already presented by the pandemic. Staffing capacity may have limited the strategies and actions rural districts were able to take, which is particularly important to consider given the effects that staff, such as teachers and school counselors, can have on students' academic and social-emotional well-being (Graham et al., 2016; Littlecott et al., 2018). However, differences in local planning by urbanicity may also reflect the district-level policies in place, as more localized plans at the school- or classroom-level could have been excluded from LCPs to spotlight districtwide actions instead.

As policy proffers guidelines for practice, it is important to examine policy documents that directly induce action (Cardno, 2018), particularly during a crisis, which alters the sensemaking— and, subsequently, the decisions—that can affect long-term recovery (Kennedy-Paine et al., 2013). Therefore, this analysis explores the details of district plans in California during the first full academic year of schooling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results reveal that, in the midst of crisis, educational policy centers on the persistence of academic progress and the means by which that progress is assessed, and it confronts the ever-changing context wrought by crisis in its potential to affect student learning. Additionally, districts positioned flexibility at the forefront of their planning efforts, highlighted in their instructional offerings, plans to assess academic growth, and resources to support students' well-being, spotlighting the possibilities that districts were able to carve out to support students despite constraints and evolving unknowns.

While this analysis thus proffers a layered examination of local planning during crisis, potential limitations may affect these results. First, quantitative analysis may mask the complexities that underpinned districts' strategies and considerations, particularly for those managing competing crises due to wildfires (Lambert & Harrington, 2020). Additionally, although the richness of these plans was attended to in qualitative analysis, this contextual detail relied on a small sample of LCPs. District differences based on locale may also be a reflection of slight overrepresentation of suburban districts in the unified sample compared to those statewide; regardless, these results suggest greater attention must be placed on rural districts in future examinations of pandemic operations, particularly given that they traditionally operate under unique circumstances that may have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Further, while not a limitation in design, this analysis—which relies entirely on district planning documents (that is, LCPs)—must be considered in conjunction with district actions and investments, all of which ultimately shaped the learning context for students during the 2020–21 academic year.

Despite the challenges and strains that the COVID-19 crisis placed on the educational system, it can be argued that its emergence is also a rare opportunity to accelerate wide-scale education reform and innovation, since demonstrated by increases in access and capacity to use technological resources effectively as well as greater investments in expanded learning supports, among others (Myung et al., 2021). Crisis can thus bear both undesirable and desirable outcomes (Charland et al., 2021), orchestrating a turning point during which opportunities can emerge to transform a system, such as education, to expand existing resources and improve the accessibility of those traditionally unavailable. Education leaders should thus, where feasible, amplify changes in resources and routines that implementation has revealed best support students and school communities at large, seizing upon opportunities to rebuild a more equitable system.

While the pandemic continues to shape decision-making in education, it is critical to highlight the strategies, resources, and programs that may be applicable to future contexts. This study is therefore positioned to extend scholarship surrounding education planning in crisis, as it interrogates the plans outlined by public school districts, encapsulating a broad overview of not just what districts centered operations on but what these operations entailed during a year that upended traditional schooling. As this study illuminates the possibilities in planning, future work should investigate the implementation of these efforts to examine the extent to which these plans were enacted to extend understanding of the crisis responses of schools and districts and their long-term impacts on student learning.

Endnotes

[1] Districts were required to submit LCPs to local school boards for adoption by September 30, 2020 (https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/lc/learningcontattendplan.asp).

[2] LCP retrieval was aided by a team of 15 undergraduate research assistants in October 2020. As some districts may have uploaded LCPs at a later date following county office of education reviews, among other reasons, LCPs absent during initial data collection were sought again in February 2021. At the time of primary data collection, LCPs were still housed across individual district websites. Most LCPs are now linked to the California Department of Education website: https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/lc/calcplinks2021.asp.

[3] Of the LCPs located, 77 percent were board-approved final versions. The remaining 23 percent were identified as drafts; therefore, while draft LCPs may not reflect changes potentially made at a later date, they offer preliminary evidence of the school operations framework that districts intended to implement during the 2020–21 school year.

[4] Automated word counts were conducted across five themes: instruction, technology, attendance, assessment, and well-being. Although some searched terms also appear in template headings and/or directions, results do not include these mentions.

[5] During the coding process, intensive training and weekly meetings safeguarded consistency within groups and ensured consensus. Additionally, coding was organized across the themes previously identified, including instruction, assessment, technology, attendance, and well-being.

[6] The locale of a district is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics at the Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, and is a measure of location based on data from the US Census Bureau and determined by population size and distance from an urban center.

[7] The NSLP uses family income levels to determine eligibility for students to receive free or reduced-price lunch. For this analysis, districts in which more than 55 percent of the student population are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are considered low-income districts.

[8] For the purposes of this analysis, low EL districts are those in which fewer than 13.21 percent of students are ELs, a cutoff based on the median proportion of English-learning students included in the sample.

9 For this and subsequent references, see the cited section of the Cal. Education Code at https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/
 codesTOCSelected.xhtml?tocCode=EDC&tocTitle=+Education+Code+-+EDC.

10 The California Digital Learning Integration and Standards Guidance was adopted by the SBE on May 12–13, 2021. To view the
 prepublication version, see https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/dl/documents/cadlisguidance.docx.

11 For this and subsequent references, see Education finance: Education omnibus budget trailer bill, S.B. 98 (2019–2020), Chapter 24
 (Cal. Stat. 2020). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB98.

12 To view the template, see https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/lc/documents/lrngcntntyatndncpln-template.docx.

13 For example, Cohort A might be on campus on Mondays and Tuesdays and Cohort B on Wednesdays and Thursdays, with Fridays
 dedicated to asynchronous instruction.

14 In a half-day schedule, one cohort of students attends in the morning while the other attends in the afternoon.

15 In an alternating schedule, specified cohorts of students attend class in person on alternating days of the week (for example,
 Monday/Wednesday), while Friday schedules may include a rotation between in-person and distance learning.

16 In this analysis, "prioritization" is defined as a district's intent to provide a student group with preliminary or preferential access to
 resources.

17 Although plans varied, Tier 1 often involved initial teacher and/or staff attempts to contact students' families, with Tier 2 strategies
 including outreach by site attendance teams, weekly or daily check-ins, matching students with a mentor, or home visits,
 among other actions.

18 For more information on RVOEP, see https://rvoep.org.

19 California presently mandates the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) in Grades K–12 for students
 whose primary language is a language other than English. The ELPAC consists of two exams: one that initially identifies
 students as ELs and an annual summative assessment to measure students' progress.

20 For more information about PBIS, see https://www.pbis.org.

21 In spring 2020, standardized testing (for example, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress), primarily
 measuring students' academic progress in math and ELA in Grades 3–8 and 11, was cancelled in California. In spring 2021,
 districts were given the option to forego administering standardized tests if a similar substitute was available and administered
 uniformly across a grade, school, or district, with 18 of the state's 25 largest school districts opting to offer alternative tests
 (Johnson, 2021).

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Appendix: Searched Terms for Automated Word Counts Across All Dimensions of Analysis

Variable	Concept	Searched terms
Instructional method		
remote_adj	Distance learning	Distance learning/Distance education, remote learning, virtual learning
hybrid	Hybrid learning	Hybrid, hybrid
Technological resources		
devices	Technological devices	(1:1 | 1-1 | one to one) (device | technolog(ies|y) | computing | chromebook | laptop | tablet | iPad)s, Chromebook(s), iPad(s), tablet(s), laptop(s)
connect	Internet connectivity	Hotspot(s), hot spot(s), hot-spot(s)
Attendance/engagement		
attend_track	Monitor attendance	tracking/monitoring attendance, tracking/monitoring engagement, Attendance monitoring, Attendance tracking, Engagement monitoring, Engagement tracking
sel_sst	Intensive reengagement strategies	Student study team, School attendance review board, SARB, School attendance review committee, SARC, School attendance review team, SART
Academic content		
science	Science	science, STEM, STEAM
Assessment		
assess_plan	Assessment planning	assessment calendar(s), assessment plan(s), balanced assessment system(s)
assess_diag	Diagnostic assessment	needs assessment/diagnostic
assess_instr	Formative assessment	benchmark assessment(s), interim assessment, Interim assessment block(s), (IAB), formative
assess_sum	Summative assessment	summative assessment
School climate		
sel_sch_climate	Schooling environment	school climate, school culture
sel_behav_supp	Behavior supports	Positive Behavior Interventions and Support, PBIS, Positive Behavior Support, PBS
Mental health		
sel_mh_serv	Mental health supports	Mental health services, Mental health counseling, Counseling, Suicide prevention, Suicide hotline, Mental health hotline, Tele-health/TeleHealth, Self-refer
sel_mindful	Mindfulness supports	Mindfulness, Resilience, Mindful Mondays, Wellness Wednesdays
Social-emotional learning		
sel_mh	Social-emotional learning	SEL, Social-emotional learning/social emotional learning, Social-emotional wellness/Social emotional wellness, Social-emotional development/Social emotional development
sel_mh_surv	Wellness monitoring	Wellness Checks/wellness surveys, Risk Assessments/at-risk assessments, SEL Universal Screener/Universal Screener, CA Healthy Kids Survey, Kelvin Survey, BIMAS SEL screener, BIMAS, Behavioral Intervention Monitoring Assessment System

Note. Searched terms include all potential variations of a word, such as capitalization and synonym differences that may appear in district LCPs.

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