

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

Equity Analysis of Rhode Island School Reopening Plans

On March 13, 2020, Governor Gina Raimondo closed all Rhode Island public schools in response to rising numbers of coronavirus cases. The following week, Rhode Island public schools transitioned to distance learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. As of August 7, 2020, more than 19,700 Rhode Island residents have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and the state has suffered more than 1,000 deaths.¹ The coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately impacted communities of color in Rhode Island with a greater percentage of cases in the core cities of Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket than in the remainder of the state. During the school closures, the nation witnessed the murder of George Floyd and subsequent national and local protests of police brutality and systemic racism. Rhode Island students and educators organized and participated in many protests throughout the state. COVID-19 and this social unrest has highlighted the many health, education, and economic disparities that exist for people of color and people with low incomes and the need to address these inequities.

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) released guidance for reopening schools and required all school districts to submit plans for reopening schools that considered four possible reopening scenarios – full distance learning for all, limited in-person learning, partial in-person learning, and full-in person learning for all. Each district was required to submit evidence that its plans address the needs of differently-abled students/students with disabilities and Multilingual Learners/English Learners. Districts were also required to incorporate plans to serve vulnerable students, defined as students who are differently-abled; Multilingual Learners (MLL); homeless or living in temporary housing; migrant; at-risk of leaving school; living in poverty or whose families face other challenges; or those directly affected by COVID-19, but evidence of serving these additional groups was not required.

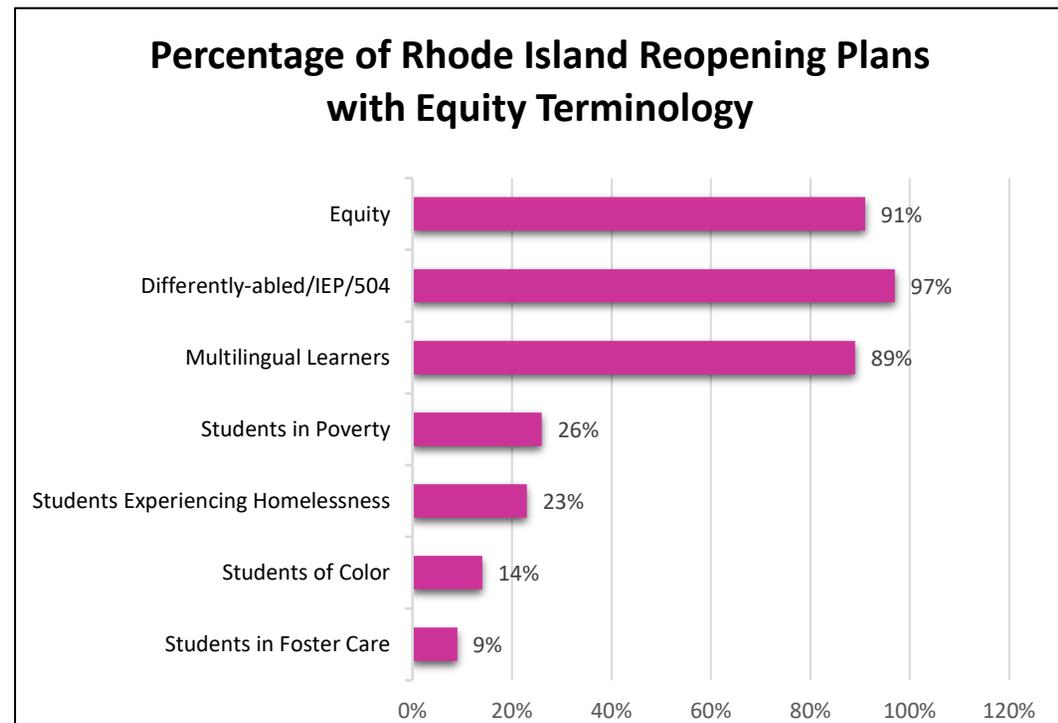
This analysis reviews all Rhode Island public school district reopening plans as presented on district websites on August 6, 2020 through an equity lens with special attention to differently-abled students, MLLs, students living in poverty, students experiencing homelessness, students of color, and students in foster care. All plans are available for review at www.back2schoolri.com.

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Reopening Plans

Closing unacceptable, wide, and persistent gaps for differently-abled students, students of color, low-income students, Multilingual Learners (MLL), students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness must be Rhode Island’s most urgent educational priority. As of August 6, 2020, 91% (32) public school district plans included the terms “equity” or “equitable” in their reopening plans. Most districts used these terms as part of their guiding principles for reopening schools. This analysis will review how district plans address equity by examining how plans meet the needs of specific groups.

- ◆ Terminology that refers to differently-abled students is included in 97% (34) of district plans.
- ◆ Terminology that refers to MLLs is included in 89% (31) of district plans.
- ◆ Terminology that refers to students living in poverty is included in 26% (9) of district plans.
- ◆ Terminology that refers to students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity is included in 23% (8) of district plans.
- ◆ Terminology that refers to students of color is included in 14% (5) of district plans.
- ◆ Terminology that refers to students in foster care is included in 9% (3) of district plans.



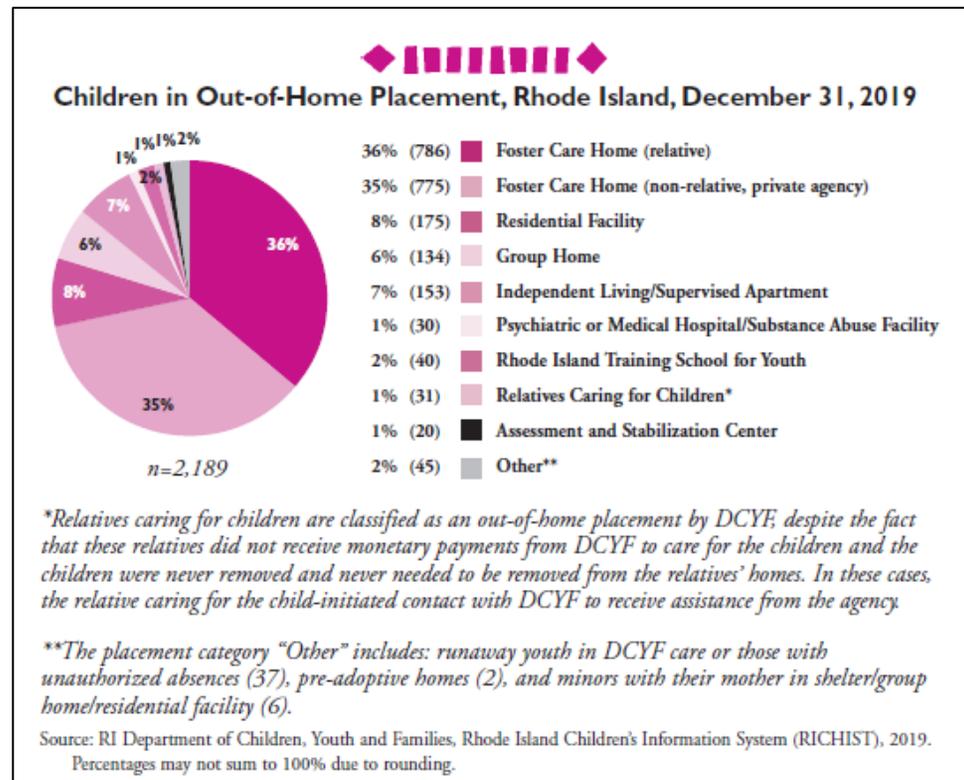
Many districts used the term vulnerable to describe students who are differently abled; MLL; homeless or living in temporary housing; migrant; at-risk of leaving school; living in poverty or whose families face other challenges; or those directly affected by COVID-19 and prioritized these students for transportation and in-person learning in limited in-person and partial in-person reopening scenarios.

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Students in Foster Care

As of December 31, 2019, there were 2,189 children under age 21 in the care of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) who were in out-of-home placements.² Children in out-of-home placement is the number of children who have been removed from their families and are in the care of DCYF while awaiting permanency. Out-of-home placements include foster care homes, group homes, assessment and stabilization centers, residential facilities, and medical facilities. Children in foster care are about twice as likely as their peers to be absent from school or to be suspended, and are nearly three times more likely than their peers to be expelled from school.³ Appropriate supports and services can help youth in care maximize their potential and ensure that they are prepared for higher education and work. One-third of children in foster care will experience five or more school changes before they turn age 18, and such changes often result in lost academic progress.⁴ The federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* includes provisions to give children in foster care more educational stability by allowing students to stay in their school of origin if it is in their best interest and providing transportation to that school.⁵

- ◆ Students in foster care are explicitly mentioned in 9% (3) of school reopening plans.



Spotlight:

- ◆ **North Providence** includes an outreach plan to communicate with families about students' rights to remain in their school of origin and to receive transportation.

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Students of Color

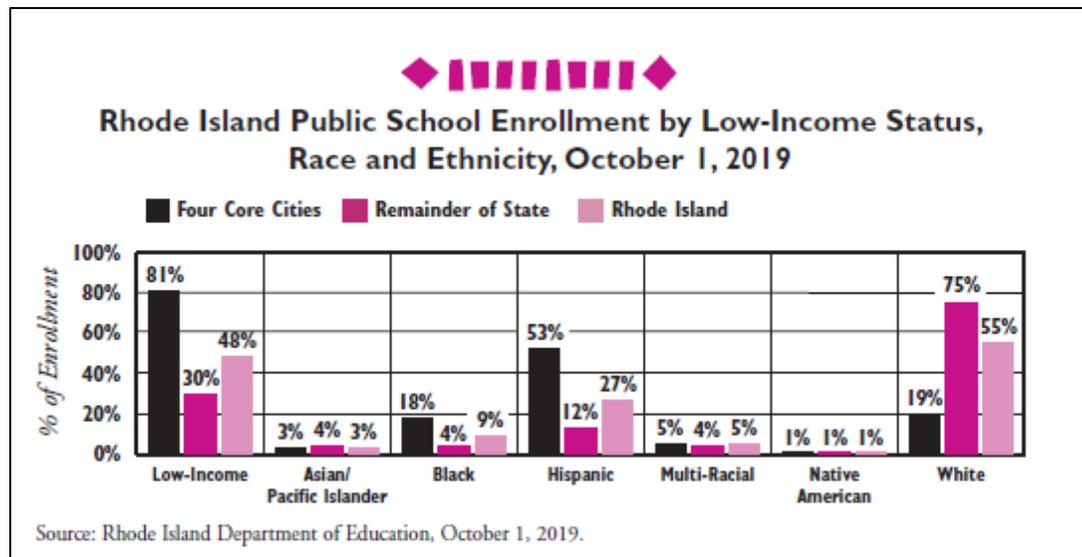
In the U.S., historical racism in government policies has resulted in Black and Native American children being seven times more likely and Latino children nearly five times more likely to live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty than White children.⁶ Residential segregation results in schools that are also segregated by race and income. As of August 7, 2020, in Rhode Island, 46% of COVID-19 cases were among Hispanic residents, 36% among White residents, 12% among Black residents, 3% among Multiracial residents, and 4% among residents of other races or ethnicities. Nationally, Hispanic and Black households are projected to face the greatest increase in poverty, and racial and ethnic disparities may be exacerbated if people of color face greater employment disadvantages. Additionally, witnessing racial injustices like the murder of George Floyd and the long-standing impacts of systemic racism can be traumatic experiences for students and their families, creating additional stress for students of color.

In October 2019, 55% of Rhode Island public school students were White, 27% were Hispanic, 9% were Black, 3% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% were Multi-Racial, and 1% were Native American.

- ◆ Students of color are explicitly mentioned in 14% (5) of district reopening plans.
- ◆ Anti-racism was explicitly mentioned in six district reopening plans (**Barrington, Central Falls, Jamestown, Lincoln, Middletown, and Providence**).

Spotlight

- ◆ **Central Falls'** plan states its vision is "to not return to all the pre-pandemic ways of school as we knew it but rather restructure systems that are barriers for students to achieve at the highest levels. This means reshaping systems to be culturally and linguistically sustaining, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive for all stakeholders, especially students, families, and team members of color and from marginalized groups."
- ◆ **Middletown's** plan includes a series of student lessons that cover a variety of topics including anti-racism. These lessons will be delivered during professional development days and will be incorporated into morning meetings and advisories.
- ◆ **Providence's** reopening plan acknowledges the tremendous impact of COVID-19 and systemic racism on students and families.



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Students Experiencing Homelessness

There are three primary causes of homelessness among children and youth – economic problems, family conflict, and residential instability resulting from foster care and institutional placements. Homeless children and youth are more likely than their peers to change schools, be chronically absent, face disciplinary actions, have low academic achievement, be held back, and drop out.^{7,8} They may also face difficulties attending school due to a lack of required enrollment records, as well as lack of transportation to school. During the 2018-2019 school year, Rhode Island public school personnel identified 1,475 children as homeless. Of these children, 70% lived with other families (“doubled up”), 16% lived in shelters, 13% lived in hotels or motels, and 1% were unsheltered.⁹

- ◆ Students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity are explicitly mentioned in 23% (8) of district plans.

Spotlight:

- ◆ **North Providence** includes a plan to identify students and families who are not responding to school communications and implement a student and family outreach plan and to involve the homeless liaison to identify and support families who may be experiencing homelessness.
- ◆ **Providence** will prioritize in-person and/or live interactive distance learning for homeless students.

Homeless Children Identified by Public Schools, Rhode Island, 2018-2019 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	# OF CHILDREN IDENTIFIED AS HOMELESS BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PERSONNEL
<i>Charter Schools</i>	8,427	51
<i>State-Operated Schools</i>	1,783	*
<i>UCAP</i>	135	0
<i>Four Core Cities</i>	41,461	608
<i>Remainder of State</i>	91,441	830
<i>Rhode Island</i>	143,247	1,475

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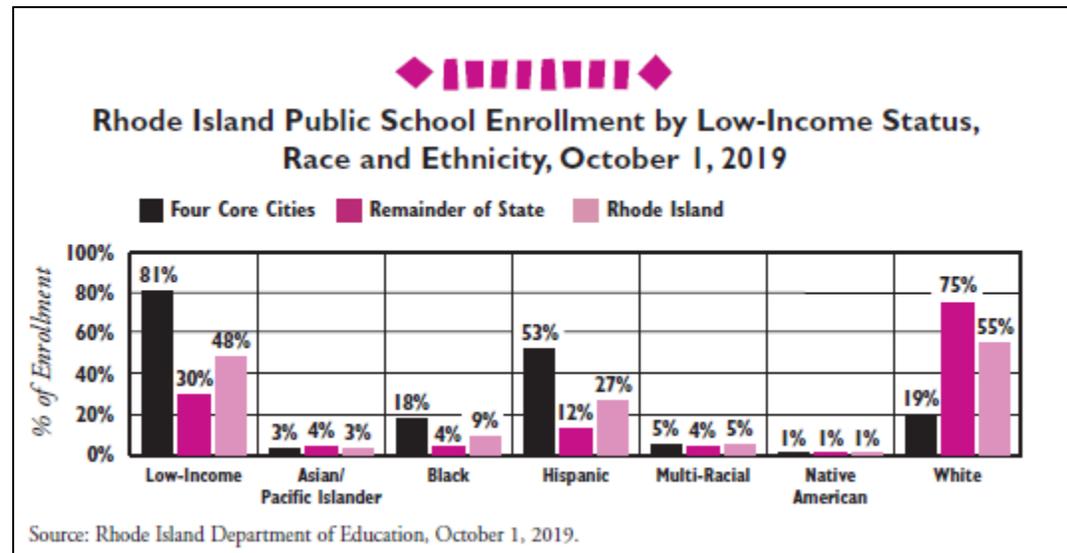
Students Living in Poverty

In October 2019, 48% of public school students in Rhode Island were eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. Loss of employment in low-income households due to COVID-19 is expected to impact economic mobility and have devastating long-lasting effects on children in poverty. During school closures, districts provided free grab-and-go meals to students and families, and those students who received free or reduced-price lunch during the school year received Pandemic EBT cards to assist with food security during school closures. All school districts should make additional efforts to encourage families to complete applications for the free or reduced-price meal program because more families may now qualify due to pandemic-related changes in employment.

- ◆ Children in poverty were explicitly mentioned in 26% (9) of district plans.
- ◆ More than half (20) of the districts included plans to distribute hot spots or laptops or partnerships with wireless providers to offer discounted internet service.

Spotlight:

- ◆ **Central Falls** plans to create “Connectivity Hubs” to allow families to access the internet if the district must reopen under the limited in-person scenario. The district is also working with the Central Falls Public Library and the Rhode Island College Workforce Development Hub to gain connectivity access for families in need.
- ◆ **Little Compton** will prioritize students with unreliable internet access at home for limited in-person instruction.
- ◆ **Middletown** will provide all students with all resources and supplies needed including loaning of arts supplies.
- ◆ **West Warwick** has budgeted \$20,000 to provide internet access to the district’s most vulnerable families.

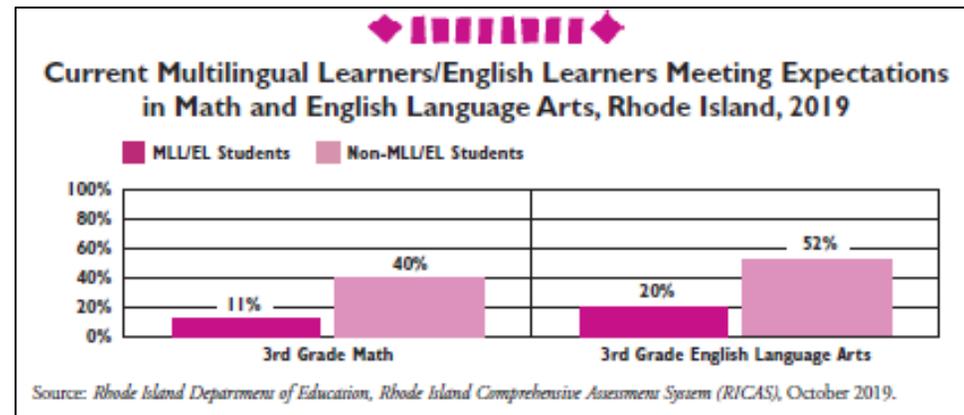


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Multilingual Learners (MLL)

In the 2018-2019 school year in Rhode Island, MLL students were 10% (13,792) of total students. Of all MLL students, 83% were enrolled in free or reduced-price lunch programs, and 73% lived in the four core cities. In the 2018-2019 school year, MLL students in Rhode Island public schools spoke 95 different languages. The majority (80%) spoke Spanish, 5% spoke a creole language, 2% spoke Portuguese, 2% spoke Arabic, 1% spoke Chinese, and 10% spoke other or multiple languages.¹⁰

- ◆ MLLs are specifically mentioned in 89% (31) of district reopening plans.
- ◆ All reopening plans were available in English, two were available in Spanish (**Cranston, Providence**), and three districts provided summaries in Spanish and Portuguese. No plans were available in additional languages.
- ◆ Most plans prioritize MLL students for in-person learning.



Spotlight:

- ◆ **Bristol-Warren** has created a help line to connect parents of Multilingual Learners and differently-abled students to assistance with student assignments, services, and support.
- ◆ The **Central Falls** plan states that all teachers will incorporate language development strands into distance learning plans that align to students' needs and that all small group support, scaffolding, and differentiation will address the linguistic needs of students. Family modules will be developed to help families support language development at home. Additional support will be available to students and families by phone, and packets will be made available in English and the student's home language.
- ◆ **East Providence** will consider extending learning opportunities to MLLs to close gaps and will assign MLL teachers to grade levels with the most need.
- ◆ **Providence** and **Central Falls** will use the Kinvoled Text Messaging system which translates messages into multiple languages.

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Differently-Abled Students/Students With Disabilities

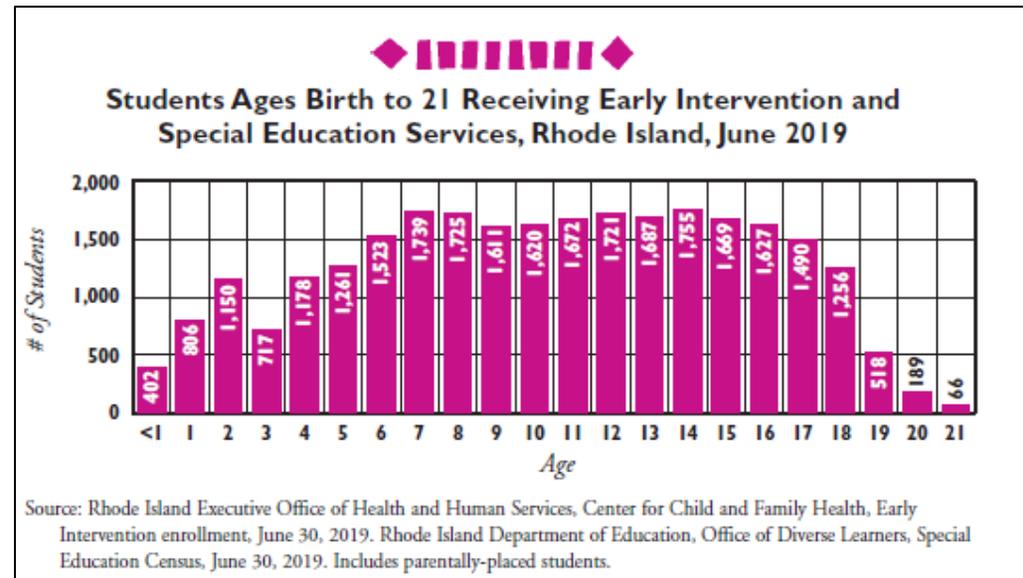
During the 2018-2019 school year, 15% of Rhode Island public school students were receiving special education services.¹¹ In Rhode Island, differently-abled students/students with disabilities are much less likely to meet or exceed expectations on the *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*. In 2019, among students in grades 3 to 8 with a disability, only 6% met or exceeded expectations in English Language Arts (ELA) and 5% in math compared with 44% meeting expectations in ELA and 34% in math among students without special education needs.¹²

According to the Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN) [Distance Learning & Special Education Parent Survey](#), 59% of parents said their child required an adult’s support “all of the time” during distance learning and 22% said their child required support “most of the time.” Almost half of parents (49.6%) responding to this survey said they would prefer their child return to all in-person learning in the fall.

- ◆ Differently-abled students are specifically mentioned in 97% (34) of school reopening plans. Of those plans, most prioritize differently-abled students for in-person learning; some prioritized students with significant academic or therapeutic needs.
- ◆ Most plans included utilizing existing services such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to identify and address students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs.
- ◆ Six districts included plans to identify and provide compensatory services for IEP services that could not be delivered during distance learning.

Spotlight:

- ◆ **Foster-Glocester’s** plan includes therapeutic support including desensitization strategies and positive reinforcement to help differently-abled students maintain mask wearing throughout the day.



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Programs and Strategies

In Rhode Island, students, educators, parents, community members and policymakers have increased the awareness of and have implemented education programs to address inequities in Rhode Island schools. It is critical that these equity-driven strategies and programs continue to be supported and are intentionally incorporated into school reopening plans with a focus on college and career readiness strategies, student-centered learning approaches, student social-emotional and mental health, and educator professional development.

College and Career Readiness

Many students, especially low-income students, face barriers to college enrollment and success, such as insufficient academic preparation, difficulty navigating the application and financial aid processes, and the high cost of college. Schools can help address these barriers and improve college access by ensuring that all students have access to advanced coursework; take college entrance exams; complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); get adequate counseling to enroll in college and access financial aid; and target financial aid strategically to students with the greatest needs.¹³ Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs allow students to explore a career of interest, learn specific career skills, and earn an industry-recognized credential that can lead to employment in a chosen field. In Rhode Island, students from low-income families and students of color compose a large percentage of students who earn an industry-recognized credential.¹⁴ Six districts specifically address college and career readiness in their reopening plans.

- ◆ **Cranston's plan** includes student review of progress towards graduation requirements eight times throughout the school year and discusses modification of Performance Based Graduation Requirement assessments to accommodate digital format and limited in-person instruction.
- ◆ **North Kingstown** will prioritize in-person learning for high school seniors in danger of failing.
- ◆ **Foster-Glocester's** limited in-person plan prioritizes specific CTE students, like students in materials and manufacturing programs, to attend in-person twice per week. The plan also includes removal of tracking of separate College Prep and Honors courses and will implement an Honors for All model.
- ◆ **Providence** will prioritize in-person and/or synchronous distance learning for students enrolled in CTE programs that require hands-on opportunities.

Student-Centered Learning

Student-centered learning means learning that is personalized, competency-based, can happen anytime and anywhere, and allows students to take ownership over their own learning.¹⁵ Adopting student-centered learning practices at the high school level can help students develop meaningful relationships with adults inside and outside of school and increase engagement and achievement for students from a variety of backgrounds.

- ◆ **West Warwick** includes Freshman Mentor and Transform Mentor Programs at the high school.

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- ◆ **Narragansett** states that elective courses will be offered regardless of the reopening scenario.
- ◆ **Providence** will partner with The New Teachers Project to develop a series of lesson plans to offer responsive instruction with a special emphasis on building community.

Social-Emotional and Mental Health

The coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately impacted communities of color in Rhode Island with a greater percentage of cases in communities with a high concentration of poverty and has potential to impact the social-emotional and mental health of children who know people who have tested positive for or have died from COVID-19, those who have experienced financial hardships because of the pandemic, and those whose disconnection with school has negatively impacted their well-being. Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, in school, and in the community. Mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, prevent or affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk for suicide. In Rhode Island, one in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has a diagnosable mental health problem; one in ten (9.8%) has a significant functional impairment. In Rhode Island more than one-third (36%) of children ages three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining needed care.

According to the *2019 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, 76% of high school students reported having at least one day in the past month where their mental health was not good. About one in three (32%) Rhode Island high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two or more weeks that they stopped doing some normal activities and one in seven (15%) reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year. According to the *2020 SurveyWorks* results, 60% of Rhode Island students in grades 6-12 report stress has interfered with their ability to participate in school.

RIDE required evidence of a process to identify students in need of social-emotional supports.

- ◆ Many districts included universal Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) screening of all students and staff at the beginning of the school year to identify supports needed and implementation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum including those offered by the Antidefamation League: World of Difference, Caring Connections, Choose Love, Conscious Discipline, Kelso's Choice, Kingian Nonviolence strategies, and Zones of Regulation. Many plans included Employee Assistance Programs that provide free meditation, mindfulness, and yoga classes for staff.
- ◆ **Cranston** will create flexible schedules that allow students, teachers, and parents to "catch their breath" and get caught up on work if needed but also to learn from more offline activities including SEL and project-based learning activities.

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- ◆ **Charlho** will identify students who were of concern pre-shelter in place and in what ways; which students are now of concern after sheltering in place; students who have self-nominated as having a difficult time; and students whose parents have expressed concern; or vulnerable students who are not engaging in learning.
- ◆ **Coventry's** grading policies will consider student physical and mental health. The district will also administer an SEL student survey to identify students most impacted by the pandemic with a focus on financial hardship, COVID, homelessness, and family turmoil.
- ◆ **East Providence** will partner with East Bay Community Action (EBCAP) and the East Providence Health Equity Zone for referrals for food, housing, and mental health services.
- ◆ **North Kingstown** will partner with the Youth Restoration Project for staff SEL trainings.
- ◆ **Providence** includes alternatives to suspension and aims to increase the number of schools operating school-based mental health programs.

Professional Development

RIDE required Reopening Plans to show evidence of training for restorative supports and professional learning offerings for teachers around trauma, social emotional learning, restorative practices, and culturally responsive education.

- ◆ Most reopening plans included training in crisis intervention, mental health, trauma-based instruction, culturally relevant and responsive education, and social-emotional learning.
- ◆ Several districts included partnerships with nonprofit organizations to provide equity, bias, culturally relevant and SEL training, including partnerships with The Autism Project; Beat COVID-19; Children's Youth Cabinet, RI (CYC); Center for Leadership and Educational Equity; Diversity Talks; Center for Resilience; Creative Options, Inc.; Equity Institute; Health Equity Zones; Highlander Institute; The Sargent Center; Yale Childhood-Trauma Learning Collaborative; and the Youth Restoration Project.
- ◆ Several plans included faculty book groups that will read a selection of books including
 - ⇒ *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* by Zaretta Hammond
 - ⇒ *Lost in School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them* by Ross W. Greene
 - ⇒ *Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race* by Debbie Irving
 - ⇒ *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall
 - ⇒ *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It* by Eric Jensen

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- ◆ Eleven districts included professional development on implicit bias, systemic racism or anti-racist policies, practices, and education (**Barrington, Central Falls, Cumberland, East Providence, Jamestown, Lincoln, Middletown, Providence, Smithfield, West Warwick, Westerly**).
- ◆ **Johnston** SEL teams will meet at the district level, using the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s (CASEL’s) Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Roadmap for Reopening School to guide the work to support all members of the school community. This document incorporates SEL and an asset-based, culturally sensitive trauma-informed lens.
- ◆ **North Smithfield** states that all teachers will analyze their classroom data, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, and then make changes to their curriculum and teaching practices using a culturally-responsive teaching and learning framework.
- ◆ **Pawtucket** would like to expand their professional development to look at emerging data around the impact of the pandemic on the economic, health, and mental health of our students and their families.

Terms Searched:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| • Equity | • Students of color | • Students experiencing homelessness |
| • Equitable | • Race | • Homeless |
| • Differently-abled | • Ethnicity | • Temporary housing |
| • Students with disabilities | • Black | • Housing insecure |
| • Individual Education Plan/IEP | • Asian | • Students in foster care |
| • 504 | • Hispanic | • DCYF |
| • Special education | • Latino/Latinx | • Vulnerable |
| • Low-Income students | • Native American | • Anti-racist |
| • Free or reduced-price lunch/FRL | • Multilingual Learners/MLL | • Racism |
| • Poverty | • English Learner/EL | • Bias |
| • Socio-economic | • ESL | |

¹ Rhode Island Department of Health, Rhode Island COVID-19 Response Data.

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² Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, Rhode Island Children's Information System (RICHIST), December 31, 2019.

³ *Fostering success in education: National factsheet on the educational outcomes of children in foster care.* (2018). National Working Group on Foster Care and Education.

⁴ Heimpel, D. (2018). *Analysis: Rhode Island ESSA case could mean an end to repeated school transfers for youth in foster care.* Retrieved January 23, 2020, from www.the74million.org

⁵ Heimpel, D. (2018). *Analysis: Rhode Island ESSA case could mean an end to repeated school transfers for youth in foster care.* Retrieved January 23, 2020, from www.the74million.org

⁶ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019). *Children living in high poverty, low-opportunity neighborhoods.* Retrieved June 3, 2020, from www.aecf.org

⁷ Ingram, E. S., Bridgeland, J. M., Reed, B., & Atwell, M. (2016). *Hidden in plain sight: Homeless students in America's public schools.* Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises & Hart Research Associates.

⁸ Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2019). *Runaway and homeless youth: Demographics and programs.* Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

⁹ Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year.

¹⁰ Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year.

¹¹ Rhode Island Department of Education, October 1, 2019.

¹² Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, 2019.

¹³ Miller, A., Valle, K., Engle, J., & Cooper, M. (2014). *Access to attainment: An access agenda for 21st century college students.* Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.

¹⁴ Rhode Island Department of Education, 2017-2018

¹⁵ *Engaging Students In their own learning. Centered on results: Assessing the impact of student-centered learning.* (2015). Quincy, MA: Nellie Mae Education Foundation