

The Effects of COVID-19 on Distance Learning

Marilyn Orta

On March 13, 2020, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency due to the health risks of contracting COVID-19. School closures affected more than 1.5 billion students globally, leading school districts to transition to distance learning to meet students' educational needs ("The evolution," 2020). As a result, education has changed drastically with the remarkable rise of e-learning, a form of distance learning where teaching is done remotely and on digital platforms. While COVID-19 has brought distance learning to a much wider audience, leading to contingency planning and becoming an unexpected solution for some

students, it has also uncovered significant systemic problems and given some a negative outlook on distance learning.

NEGATIVE OUTLOOK

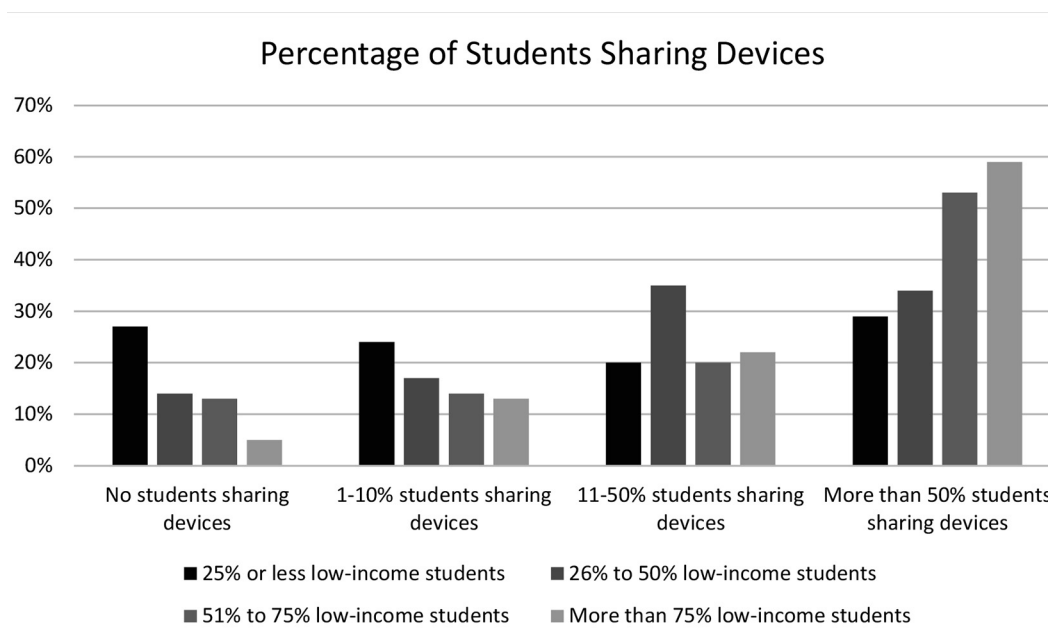
Due to COVID-19, the transition to distance learning was quick but not necessarily effective, exposing systemic problems, such as lack of resources for some students and the growing digital divide. Black and Hispanic students, especially those in low-income households, were disadvantaged due to a lack of high-speed internet (Anderson & Perrin, 2020). Students who live in rural communities also struggled when transitioning to distance learning because of the lack of access to a computer or other electronic devices, as Figure 1 suggests (Anderson, 2020).

Online learning and teaching, according to research, are effective only if students have consistent access to the internet and computers. Additionally, teachers must receive targeted training and support for online instruction. However, because the transition to distance learning is happening so quickly, these requirements were not present during the pandemic. The lack of resources and support has caused teaching and learning to be negatively impacted, leading to a negative outlook from several stakeholders (Li & Lalani, 2020).

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The threat of future pandemics and economic disturbances highlights the need for effective distance education to prepare for





Note: Percentage of students sharing devices with parents, siblings, or other family members and friends to complete their schoolwork during coronavirus. Results show responses from teachers and district leaders (Bushweller, 2020, p. 12).

Figure 1. Percentage of students sharing devices.

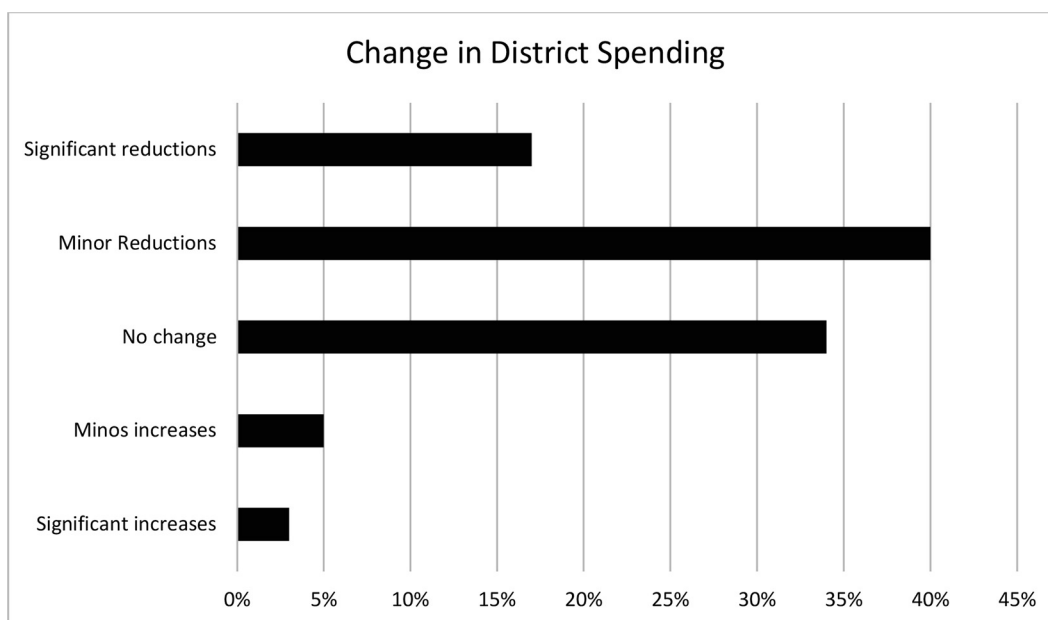
the next global health emergency and bridge the longstanding socioeconomic and educational gap. Research shows that a lack of contingency planning worsens the impacts on learning of recessions, natural disasters, and pandemics. Education policy has mostly ignored research on education in an emergency because it did not seem to apply to rich countries (Garcia & Weiss, 2020, p. 16).

Contingency planning thus needs to be institutionalized and include emergency funding to replenish the resources drained during an emergency. Educational budgets may be cut after emergencies arise due to the economic shock, as shown in Figure 2 (Garcia & Weiss, 2020, p. 17). Thankfully, because of COVID-19, many school districts have developed permanent virtual options, creating an opportunity for families to continue with distance learning, even for younger children.

UNEXPECTED SOLUTION

Distance learning may be a good option for those who face challenges such as social anxiety because online interactions are often seen as less intimidating. It may also be viable for families where guardians like the idea of homeschooling but still want a connection to a formal program (Bombardieri, 2021, p. 10). However, the flexibility allows them to participate anytime and anywhere as long as there is an Internet connection. Research on homeschooling shows that it works well for students who have intention, personalized, and sufficient resources (Garcia & Weiss, 2020, p. 2).

A student who is often out of school for reasons such as chronic illness will have an option to stay connected with the adoption of cameras in the classrooms. Schools disrupted by natural disasters such as blizzards or wildfires will have a fallback.



Note: Results show responses from district leaders (Bushweller, 2020, p. 16).

Figure 2. District change in spending since COVID-19.

Distance learning has gone from an often overlooked option in the learning and training community to the norm for many learners.

GAINED POPULARITY

Even before COVID-19, education technology was already high growth and adopted. The overall market for online education is projected to reach \$350 Billion by 2025. Whether video conferencing tools or online learning software, there has been a significant surge in usage since COVID-19 (Li & Lalani, 2020). Distance learning has become mainstream and gained popularity by showing that it is more convenient and inclusive for learners and increases access to high-quality learning materials. Research suggests that distance learning has been shown to increase retention of information, with students retaining 25–60% more materials when learning online and taking less time (Li & Lalani, 2020).

COVID-19 created a great opportunity. With a worldwide focus on distance learning, it will continue to improve. The future will likely include a hybrid education model that blends in-person classes with distance learning for a more flexible experience.

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