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Published online: 03 May 2024.

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Conceptualizing District COVID-19 Response as a Portal for Increasing Equitable Access

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ABSTRACT

During the pandemic, principals played crucial roles in responding to the exacerbated inequities that accompanied new modes of learning. Much less understood and explored is the role played by school districts in supporting these responses. This study seeks to understand how districts responded to the pandemic, and the potential of these responses to promote equitable access for marginalized students. We analyzed data from three different American School District Panel COVID-19 surveys administered to school districts in 2021 to provide answers to these questions. We report our findings across three themes: ensuring equitable access through direct services, making changes to curriculum and instructional practices, and expanding schools' capacity to address equity. We conclude with the implications for the role of school districts in supporting principals' capacity to advance equity-oriented leadership practices, leadership preparation, and future research.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across the world to shut their doors to in-person learning and transition to varied forms of remote learning in March 2020, affecting roughly 55.1 million students in 124,000 schools across the United States (Education Week, 2020). Studies emerging from the pandemic have shown that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately impacted by this transition (DeMatthews et al., 2023; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Hamilton & Ercikan, 2022). Admittedly, while the pandemic did not cause nor create much of the inequities that surfaced, several scholars have argued that it illuminated those that existed before (García & Weiss, 2020; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021).

Despite the many challenges that emerged, a few scholars have taken a more optimistic view of the pandemic. Among these, Roy (2020) and Ladson-Billings (2021) likened the COVID-19 pandemic to a portal for disrupting systemic inequities and a reimagination of current structures through a "hard-reset." Virella and Cobb (2021) noted that the pandemic highlighted educational inequities and in doing so, provided an opportunity for principals to support their most disadvantaged learners. More recently, Jackson (2024) argued that the pandemic created a window of opportunities that supported schools' responsiveness to the exacerbated inequities. Several scholars have also found that principals became more sensitive and responsive to the equity concerns of marginalized students within their schools (see Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022; Lavadenz et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Price & Mansfield, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Trinidad, 2021; Virella & Cobb, 2021).

Not surprisingly, school leaders are critical players in advancing equity and challenging inequities across their schools. However, a body of literature on principal autonomy informs us that much of what

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principals are allowed to do (or not do) is constrained by district formal and informal routines. In these discussions, principals are viewed as middle managers, mediating agents, boundary spanners, and brokers between their schools and their districts (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Kaul et al., 2022; Spillane et al., 2002), implementing policy mandates from district leaders with no authority to change (Flessa, 2012; Reid, 2020; Shaked & Schechter, 2017). Reflecting on these arguments, we believe that much of the equity-oriented practices reported in principals' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as feeding families, providing technological devices and support for students might have been influenced by provisions at the district level.[1] While the cited studies document school leaders' responsiveness to the inequities affecting their student population, much less attention has been given to district-level responses to the pandemic (Lochmiller, 2021). Grooms and Childs (2021) have called for research to explore how district policies have been developed to support marginalized students during the pandemic. In response to this call, we seek answers to the following questions:

(1) In what way did school districts respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?
   (a) To what extent, if at all, did the pandemic prompt more equitable provisions (policies, services, practices) from school districts?
   (b) If so, how did these provisions promote equitable access for marginalized students?

Answering the above questions might lead to important insights about the role of districts in mediating inequities across their schools. Also, the study acknowledges that equity-oriented policies and support from district leaders are important to supporting principals' capacity to enact equity-oriented leadership practices at the school and community levels.

Literature Review

This study builds on two broad bodies of scholarship. First, we examine the emerging literature which looks to understand the intersection between the COVID-19 pandemic and school leadership and policy. Second, we examine the literature surrounding local education agencies (LEAs) as important policy actors and their role in both the creation and implementation of equity-oriented policies. This literature review narrows in on how COVID-19 impacted operations at the school level, principals' equity-oriented crisis responses, and how these might have been influenced by policies created at the district level. Then, we conceptualize this study in the literature on schooling during the pandemic to shed light on the inequities that affected marginalized students and their access to instruction.

COVID-19, School Leadership & Policy

The COVID-19 pandemic took many by surprise, societies scrambled to respond in the midst of rapidly evolving information and sometimes what appeared to be guesswork. Schools were no exception to this as DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that most principals were unprepared for the challenges that accompanied the pandemic. They noted that less than 50% of all principals had any experience with remote or hybrid instruction. Hubbard et al. (2020) and Grissom and Condon (2021) asserted that the crisis leadership of principals during the pandemic varied greatly across schools and community contexts. These variations signaled the absence of a unified approach to managing the complications associated with the pandemic. Harris and Jones (2020) attributed this to the lack of leadership precedent and guidelines to inform leaders.

While the pandemic illuminated inequities across schools, especially surrounding access to technological devices and internet (Anthony & Miller, 2024, DeMatthews et al., 2023; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Virella & Cobb, 2021), a potential silver lining is the way in which it prompted school leaders to acknowledge and confront systemic inequities that had been previously ignored (Jackson, 2023, 2024). In addition to providing resources and technical support, principals were also forced to reconcile with deficit ideologies held by their teaching staff which came to the surface during the pandemic (McLeod

& Dulsky, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Virella & Cobb, 2021). Some scholars found that principals were more inclined to challenge school and district policies, such as attendance and disciplinary policies that were likely to further stigmatize marginalized students (Jackson et al., 2022; Kaul et al., 2022). Some leaders have utilized the pandemic to leverage greater access to resources for specific student groups. For example, Lavadenz et al. (2021) found that school leaders were responsive to the needs of their English language learners and their families beyond technological support.

Notwithstanding these responsibilities, principals were also tasked with managing the flurry of policies regarding COVID, which sometimes were competing and not well aligned with each other. Grooms and Childs (2021) noted, "principals were expected to consider local policies in conjunction with federal policies pertaining to teaching and learning with little guidance, while also navigating scrutiny from community members and other external stakeholders" (p. 143). For example, principals were expected to coordinate reopening schools while adhering to federal, state, and district COVID-19 protocols and guidelines. These arguments support our earlier assertion that much of what principals are allowed to do is dictated by district policies (Flessa, 2012; Hubbard et al., 2020; Shaked & Schechter, 2017). However, the extent to which principals' equity-oriented crisis responses were influenced by district policy mandates is unclear from the emerging literature.

School Districts as Policy Actors

While education policies are created at the federal, state, and local levels, the day to day running of schools is heavily impacted by the sensemaking and implementation of these policies at the district and school levels (Honig, 2004, 2006; Mitra, 2018; Sykes et al., 2009). Within central offices, district leaders create policies (an area less explored across the literature) that allow for state and federal policies to be implemented within the specific context of the district (Spillane, 1998b). Honig and Coburn (2008) explain that the creation of policies at this level are usually informed by a variety of evidence, including both research on best practices and data collected by the district itself. Likewise, district leaders operate within highly racialized and political contexts which influence how policies are interpreted, framed, and implemented (Irby et al., 2022; Mitra, 2018). These administrative, political, and professional spheres influence the work of district staff as they translate these policies (Cuban, 1988; Sykes et al., 2009). In navigating these tensions, Honig (2006) noted the importance of boundary-spanning between district leaders and their staff, and the local community to overcome much of these tensions. Despite these challenges and external demands, district leaders have a significant impact on the successful implementation of federal, state, and local policies since they can use their power, resources, and influence to signal the importance of particular policies (Irby et al., 2022; Rorrer et al., 2008). In doing so, greater attention and adherence is given to it by the street-level bureaucrats. Likewise, their sensemaking, and consequently their enactment of policies is also likely to impact how policies are understood and implemented.

Given these influences, scholars have turned their attention to school districts as important sites for educational reforms and equity (Rorrer et al., 2008; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Turner & Spain, 2020). On one hand, districts function as intermediaries between macro-level policies and the micro-level enactments across schools (Barbara & Krovetz, 2005; Trujillo, 2013), which allow them to shape how policies are interpreted and implemented (Spillane, 1996). On the other hand, because schools exist within district structures, "a principal cannot be expected to succeed in achieving equity unless it is also an expressed priority of the district" (Barbara & Krovetz, 2005, p. 12), highlighting the need for equity to be prioritized at the district level. In recent years, a growing number of local school districts have recognized these influences, and have equally embraced this responsibility through various equity-oriented initiatives. As an example, Davison et al. (2022) explain that the use of restorative justice practices has grown increasingly popular in districts across the United States as an intervention that mediates disciplinary inequities. Likewise, hiring Chief Equity Officers, or other synonymous positions such as Coordinator of Diversity and Equity and Director for Equity and Excellence, to

support the design and implementation of equity-oriented policies and practices across districts have gained prominence in recent years (Irby et al., 2022; M. M. Lewis et al., 2023; Mattheis, 2017).

While several scholars note the important role played by district leaders in advancing equity (see Rorrer et al., 2008; Turner, 2015; Turner & Spain, 2020), others have acknowledged the challenges and barriers that often impede these efforts. According to Spillane and Thompson (1997), the capacity of districts to enact policies well is contingent on three important elements,

> human capital (knowledge, skills, and dispositions of leaders within the district), social capital (social links within and outside of the district, together with the norms and trust to support open communication via these links), and financial resources (as allocated to staffing, time, and materials). (p. 199)

Criticisms of school-based inequities and disparities in the experiences and outcomes of marginalized students have largely centered around these elements. For example, Turner and Spain's (2020) note the contentious socio-political contexts within which district leaders operate and how these might influence their willingness or unwillingness to pursue equity-oriented policies. Likewise, limitations on financial resources often encourage district leaders to "prioritize system demands rather than stakeholder needs – which can result in unintended consequences of [district policies and] . . . initiatives in ways that replicate, rather than disrupt, existing structural inequities (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2018; Mattheis, 2017, p. 546).

While the above factors have long sabotaged districts' equity efforts, Turner and Spain (2020) reminds us of how policy windows can emerge and expand this capacity. We turn our attention to the COVID-19 pandemic as creating a window of opportunities that expanded districts' capacity to address inequities (Jackson, 2024; Roy, 2020). In particular, and given our interest in understanding if, and the extent to which district policies enabled equitable access during the pandemic, we recognize the influences of federal support through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds as expanding districts' capacity to prioritize the needs of stakeholders during the pandemic instead of system demands (Jackson, 2024; Thelen-Creps et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framing

To conceptualize the current study, we draw on research findings emerging from the pandemic illuminating the various forms of inequities and disadvantages that affected schools and students. We acknowledge that marginalized communities were more impacted by the exacerbated inequities across schools (Hamilton & Ercikan, 2022). In so doing, our study rests on the assumption that districts' prioritization of provisions likely to benefit marginalized students, especially across districts serving high proportions of these students was undergirded by equity.

Defining Equity

Given the varied definitions and dimensions of equity in educational discussions (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Roegman et al., 2022), we see it important to briefly engage with these and clarify the dimension that frames our inquiry. Gutiérrez (2012) frames equity as encompassing four dimensions: access, achievement, identity, and power. Access reflect the resources and opportunities that students have available to them. Achievement on the other hand, moves beyond opportunities to learn, and addresses tangible results or student outcomes such as tests scores. Identity considers the extent to which students' cultural, linguistic, and or personal backgrounds is given (or not given) space throughout their learning. Power is defined as taking up issues of social transformation at different levels. Notwithstanding these different dimensions of equity, the current study defines equity in terms of access. Specifically, we conceptualize equity-oriented provisions as those policies, practices, and services that seek to remedy inequitable access to resources and learning opportunities for marginalized learners (Gutiérrez, 2012; Rodríguez et al., 2016). Though we acknowledge that "a focus on access is a necessary but insufficient approach to equity" (p. 19), we recognize it as an important

precursor to achievement, the two of which comprise the dominant axis (Gutiérrez, 2012). In addition to our scholarly interest in how district COVID-19 provisions mediate inequitable access, our conceptualization of equity was in part influenced by the nature of our data – the American School District Panel (ASDP) survey, however we revisit this as a potential limitation of this study and a possible direction for future research.

COVID-19 Inequities

During the early stages of the pandemic, a few scholars assumed that the pandemic was the "great equalizer," expected to affect everyone equally (Grooms & Childs, 2021). However, research has since shown that historically marginalized students were disproportionately impacted (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021, 2022; Curriculum Associates, 2020; Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020, Haderlein et al., 2021; Hammerstein et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; K. Lewis et al., 2021). For example, using a nationally representative panel data to examine educational access during the pandemic, Haderlein et al. (2021) found that marginalized students were least likely to have the resources needed to engage with virtual learning (i.e., internet and computer). Similarly, Dorn et al. (2020a) reported that English Language Learners and students from low-income families were less likely to receive academic support at home during the pandemic. Notwithstanding these home-based challenges, Camp and Zamarro (2022) found that these individuals were least likely to have access to in-person instruction during the pandemic, which worsened their disengagement and learning loss.

Extending beyond the student level impacts, schools serving high proportions of marginalized students were also affected, causing double disadvantages for these individuals. For example, DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that while students in schools serving high proportions of low-income, Black, or Latinx students were more likely to lack internet access and be in need of hotspots, principals in these schools were least prepared to address these issues. Furthermore, these schools were least likely to be prepared for the overnight transition to virtual learning, which could suggest that marginalized students were disengaged during the early stages of the pandemic as they were least likely to have met their teacher at the start of the school year (Haderlein et al., 2021). Compounding these challenges is the teacher shortage crisis that accompanied the pandemic (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021, 2022). Goldhaber and Theobald's (2022) analysis of teacher turnover in Washington found that classes with the top quartile of the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch experienced teacher turnover at a higher rate than their peers in low-poverty classrooms during the pandemic. Although these findings mirrored pre-COVID patterns (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ravitch, 2013), they were more pronounced during the pandemic due to the increased staffing needed to implement safety measures and facilitate school reopening (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021).

Given the disparities in access and learning opportunities noted above, it comes as no surprise that marginalized students were more likely to be disengaged from schools and experience larger test score declines than their more privileged peers (Curriculum Associates, 2020; Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; K. Lewis et al., 2021). Although the pandemics highlighted a range of inequities that have long impacted marginalized students (e.g., inequitable school funding, systemic racism, etc), three themes were especially dominant across literature on schooling during COVID-19. First, the transition to virtual learning made inequitable access to technological resources and support at home more obvious than ever (Supovitz & Manghani, 2022). Second, given the significant disruptions to school operations, curriculum and instructional transitions disadvantaged marginalized students who were more likely to be disengaged and unsupported at home. Third, the increased staffing needs and teacher turnover further impacted schools' ability to mediate learning loss for their most disadvantaged learners. As a whole, this body of literature draws our attention to these three areas to understand how policies and practices at the district level responded to these inequities.

Method

The current analysis is based on data obtained from the RAND American Educator Panel (AEP). We report descriptive data from three different ASDP COVID-19 surveys administered to school districts and CMOs in 2021. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored surveys collected data on the experiences of CMOs and district leaders on a range of topics relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic (RAND, 2021). Specific to the purpose of this paper, we analyzed data from three surveys addressing how district leaders enacted policies and practices that are likely to benefit marginalized students. The three surveys [Winter, Summer, and Fall 2021] sampled from ASDP enrolled CMOs directors and district leaders from across the United States had [*N* = *434, 292*, and *359* respondents], respectively. Each of the three surveys asked a different set of questions to survey panel participants.

In line with our intention to examine whether the pandemic prompted more equity-oriented policies and practices from district and CMO leaders, we selected and analyzed the survey items with equitable access in mind. That is, we considered the extent to which the policies and practices could mediate access-based inequities during the pandemic. First, we independently read the three questionnaires to identify questions that addressed policies and practices that are likely to encourage access to resources and learning opportunities such as providing technological devices to engage in distance learning. Then, we met to discuss their selected questions. Whenever we disagreed, a discussion ensued to justify each other's selection, and then a decision was made on whether to include the question or not. A total of 42 question items across the three surveys were identified for further analysis. The selected survey question items were grouped into three themes based on the overarching area of focus: (1) ensuring equitable access through direct services; (2) changes to curriculum and instructional practices; and (3) expanding schools' capacity to address equity. First, ensuring equitable access through the provision of direct services meant mediating many of the inequities in access illuminated by the pandemic such as lacking access to internet, computer, or parental support at home. Next, given research findings that acknowledge greater learning losses and academic disengagement for students of color and those attending high poverty schools (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Strunk et al., 2023), examining changes to curriculum and instructional practices allows us to assess districts' responsiveness to the learning disparities exacerbated by the transition to virtual learning. Lastly, given staff shortages that affected schools and the impact this had on school operations and reopening plans, we were acutely interested in understanding if districts expanded their staffing during the pandemic, and if so, in what ways.

Survey questions were analyzed descriptively using Stata. In our analyses, we also included t-tests to identify whether the reported differences between districts serving high proportions of marginalized students and those serving low proportions are statistically significant. To ensure our sample statistics reflect the broader population of districts and CMOs across the United States, survey weights were included in all analyses to account for sampling and response variations.

Results

We present our findings in three themes reflective of the broad areas of equity-oriented provisions enacted by school districts during the pandemic.

Ensuring Equitable Access Through Direct Services

As school districts quickly pivoted to online learning at the start of the pandemic, parents were left scrambling to figure out the best way to support their children's schooling while also balancing additional responsibilities brought forth by the pandemic. This shift to virtual learning was accompanied by a need for reliable internet access, computers, and IT support. As noted earlier, students from marginalized backgrounds were least likely to have access to resources needed to effectively adjust to the transition to virtual learning (Dorn et al., 2020a; Haderlein et al., 2021). Therefore,

provision of services intended to mediate inequitable access is considered equity oriented by virtue of its purpose.

In the summer 2021 survey, taken just after the 2020–21 school year, district leaders were asked about services provided before and during the pandemic. Figure 1 shows an increase in a range of services provided directly to students and families, including the provision of 1:1 devices for use at home, on-demand IT support for home technology needs, and hotspots or subsidies for home-based internet access. Districts also reported increasing the number of workshops for parents about their students' learning and an increase in school-family liaisons to better represent parents' voices. The number of districts providing families with IT support, hotspots, and weekend meals increased modestly, from 26% to 33%, from 51% to 59%, and from 13% to 21%, respectively. Increases in the provision of 1:1 devices and parent communication services were far more substantial nationally. The proportion of districts providing 1:1 devices at the secondary level more than doubled, from 41% to 83%, and elementary grades experienced almost as large of an increase. Districts also focused on expanding parent communication services. The percentage of districts with a parent liaison at their schools almost quadrupled from 6% pre-pandemic to 23% during the pandemic. And almost half of school districts nationally reported holding workshops for parents about supporting their children's learning, up from only 13% prior to the pandemic. Appendix Table A1 shows that districts serving higher proportions of low-income or students of color were more likely to provide these services during the pandemic. These efforts likely benefited students from marginalized homes since these individuals were more likely to be affected by the lack of academic support at home during the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020b, 2020b). Overall, the data suggest that school districts made conscious efforts to ensure equitable access to education during the pandemic.

Changes to Curriculum and Instructional Practices

In addition to providing direct services, districts also made significant changes to curriculum and instructional practices. When the pandemic hit in 2020, teachers created virtual classrooms in a matter of days, substantially altering their practice. At the same time, districts expanded curricular and academic support to remedy challenges that affected students during the pandemic. Among the
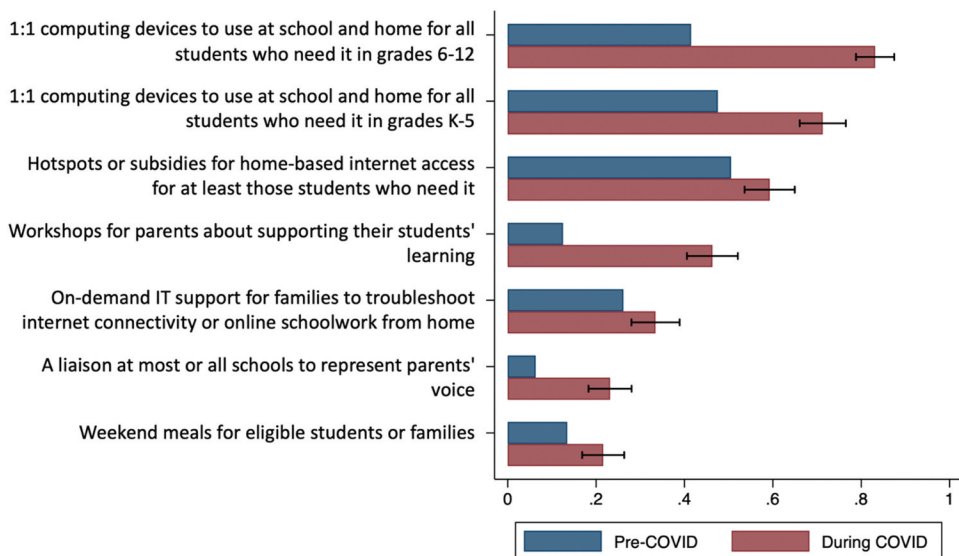

Figure 1. Percent of district and charter management organizations providing various direct family services before and during COVID-19, based on the Summer 2021 ASDP survey.

challenges was the low levels of engagement with virtual learning during the early stages of the pandemic which was especially prominent among marginalized students (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). Changes to curriculum and instructional practices that expanded opportunities to support equitable learning and engagement such as personalized tutoring, credit recovery options, teacher professional development among others reflect districts' responsiveness to the learning challenges experienced by student during the pandemic (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Table 1 shows the percentage of school districts reporting various changes to instructional programming during the 2020–21 school year, based on the Winter 2021 survey. The most common reported reform was adding software or new coursework, either online or in person, to help with teaching standards and review student's academic progress. Over half of all districts, 56%, reported adding new software or coursework for this purpose, and districts serving a majority of low-income or minoritized students engage in these practices at a higher rate. A large proportion of Winter 2021 survey respondents (about half) reported offering tutoring and tutoring was implemented equally across the two groups of districts in Table 1. Almost half of all districts also provided teachers with professional development about remedial learning, and about one-third reduced class sizes. Districts enrolling a higher share of historically underserved students were 11% points (35%) more likely to reduce class sizes, while class size increases were rare across the board.

Equitable grading practices, where students are not automatically or permanently penalized for missing assignments or failed courses have become popular in recent years including prior to the pandemic (Feldman, 2019). About one-quarter of districts reported changing their grading policy such that students would receive an incomplete rather than a failing grade. An incomplete may provide a student an opportunity to make up missed work due to the extraneous circumstances that the pandemic created. Over one-third of districts also engaged in online credit recovery. Credit recovery policies allow for greater flexibility for students' access and could lend itself to more equitable support for traditionally underserved students (Malkus, 2019). Both grading policy reforms and online course credit recovery were slightly more common in districts serving more advantaged students, raising concerns about districts' ability or willingness to implement these practices; however, the differences of between four and five percentage points are not statistically significant.

Figure 2 shows a related set of curricular reforms based on the Summer 2021 survey, asking about the same academic year (2020–21), but taken a few months after the Winter 2021 survey

Table 1. Percent of school districts and charter management organizations reporting changes to curriculum and instructional practices for the 2020–21 school year, overall and by district context.

		District Context		
	All	High Poverty/ Black/Latino	Low Poverty/ Black/Latino	Difference
Added software, courses, or coursework (whether online or in-person) to review progress	56.2%	62.2%	51.8%	0.103*
Offered one-on-one or small group tutoring (whether virtual or in-person)	49.4%	52.3%	47.3%	0.051
Provided professional development to teachers about how to remediate learning	47.0%	50.9%	44.2%	0.067
Decreased class sizes	37.3%	31.0%	41.9%	−0.109*
Offered online course credit recovery	36.6%	34.2%	38.5%	−0.042
Changed grading policy to assign students incompletes rather than failing grades	24.0%	21.8%	25.6%	−0.038
Grouped students by ability level	2.7%	4.1%	1.7%	0.024
No substantive changes to the content of the schools' instructional programs	6.3%	2.1%	9.3%	−0.073**
Increased class sizes	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	0.000

Data drawn from the Winter 2021 ASDP Survey. High Poverty/Black/Latino refers to school districts and CMOs serving the majority population of students receiving free or reduced-price meals or majority Black students or majority Latinx students. Districts and CMOs not meeting any of these criteria are considered to be Low Poverty/Black/Latino. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.
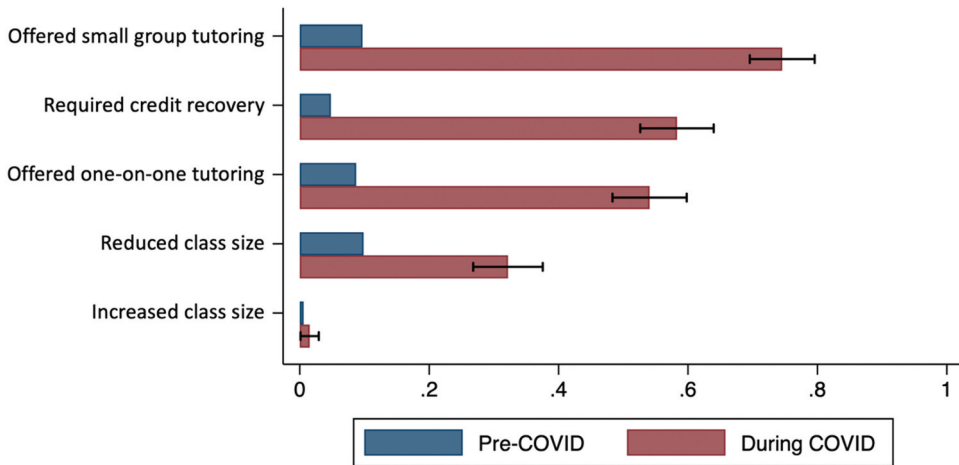
Figure 2. Percent of district and charter management organizations providing various instructional services before and during COVID-19, based on the Summer 2021 ASDP survey.

administration. Survey respondents were asked specifically about changes from before to after the onset of COVID. As shown in Figure 2, prior to the onset of COVID, fewer than 10% of districts and CMOs offered one-on-one tutoring and small group tutoring. These numbers grew exponentially after the start of the pandemic to 56% and 74%, respectively. Similarly, while requirements to complete credit recovery after failing a course were relatively rare prior to the pandemic, almost 60% of districts reported engaging with credit recovery requirements during the pandemic, representing a ten-fold increase. Before the pandemic only 10% of the participating districts and CMOs reported maintaining reduced class sizes. The number tripled to 32% after the pandemic. While the results from the Winter 2021 survey, taken in the middle of the 2020–21 school, and Summer 2021 survey, taken at the end that school year, have some discrepancies, such as a greater number of districts reporting the use of certain practices for the Summer survey administration (e.g., tutoring and credit recovery), the differences may result in part from more time passing and district leaders gaining a better sense of practices taking place in their districts during the pandemic. With the exception of increasing class size, a small increase which we attribute to the teacher retention and shortage crisis. All of the services mentioned in Figure 2 that increased when compared to the data from before COVID benefited marginalized students. Appendix Table A2 shows minimal statistically (or meaningfully) significant differences by district student demographic context.

Expanding Schools' Capacity to Address Equity

We next explore what steps districts took to help facilitate these reforms, focusing on pandemic-related changes in staffing levels reported in the Fall 2021 survey, the final survey taken, which captured staff hired by the 2021–22 school year. Table 1 illustrates the ways in which school districts were able to expand their staffing as they managed the COVID-19 pandemic. As demonstrated in Table 2, around the country, the majority of districts expanded their staffing levels for the 2021–22 school year. The most common additions were among substitute teachers and paraprofessionals, for which over half of all districts reported expanding new hires. Districts that serve either higher-poverty student populations or in which more than 50% of students identify as Black or Latinx were equally likely as other districts to hire additional substitute teachers and paraprofessionals. These changes likely helped address teacher absences and shortages, but also likely supported implementation of credit recovery and course offerings. About one third of districts reported expanding the number of tutors, aligning with the findings from earlier surveys. Districts enrolling a greater share of historically

Table 2. Percent of school districts and charter management organizations reporting expanded hires by the 2021–2022 academic year, by staff category and school context.

		District Context		
	All	High Poverty/Black/Latino	Low Poverty/Black/Latino	Difference
1. Substitute Teachers	53.6%	54.1%	53.2%	0.008
2. Paraprofessional	51.8%	51.3%	52.2%	−0.010
3. Tutors	33.1%	38.1%	28.9%	0.092+
4. Information Tech. Professional	24.5%	30.3%	19.5%	0.108*
5. Virtual School Teachers	21.7%	25.8%	18.1%	0.077+
6. School Secretaries/Admin. Assistants	13.1%	17.8%	9.0%	0.087*

Data drawn from the Fall 2021 ASDP Survey. High Poverty/Black/Latino refers to school districts and CMOs serving the majority population of students receiving free or reduced-price meals or majority Black students or majority Latinx students. Districts and CMOs not meeting any of these criteria are considered to be Low Poverty/Black/Latino. Appendix Table A2 displays this information disaggregated by contract type.
$^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$.

underserved students were significantly more likely to hire additional tutors (38% compared to 29%, a difference of 9% point or 31%), and this again aligns with our finding that these districts were more likely to offer tutoring (Table 1).

About one-quarter of all school districts expanded their staff's capacity to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing the number of Information Technology professionals, likely facilitating the IT support to families noted earlier. About one in five districts reported hiring virtual school teachers, with a slightly higher share in high-poverty or majority non-White districts, which may in part explain how districts were able to reduce class sizes. Lastly, about 13% of districts reported hiring new administrative professionals, and this was again more common among districts who enrolled more historically underserved students. Because higher-poverty schools districts received a larger share of federal stimulus per student, these districts were likely better positioned to increase staffing levels.

Across all categories of staffing, districts expanded their capacity, and by extension, that of their schools, to respond to the inequities revealed by the pandemic. For example, the increased responsibilities of paraprofessionals during the pandemic likely impacted schools' ability to better serve the varied needs of their most disadvantaged learners (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Interestingly, our findings also showed that school districts serving high proportions of marginalized students were more likely to increase their hires across all areas except paraprofessional. This increase in IT professionals is promising in especially high poverty, Black, and Latinx communities where the shift to virtual modalities was accompanied by numerous challenges especially felt in areas with poor infrastructure for high-speed internet as well as in households with limited access to technology. The increased hiring of tutoring staff also presents opportunities to provide greater support for students during the pandemic. While tutoring may have been introduced to remediate the challenges associated with the educational disruptions due to COVID-19, tutoring likely provided the largest benefits to those most marginalized because they were more likely to fall behind in their school for a variety of reasons (Dorn et al., 2020b, 2020b; Whitley et al., 2021).

One caveat we note regarding staff levels, relates to the mechanism through which different districts likely hired these individuals. During the pandemic, the federal government provided historic levels of stimulus, and funds were provided progressively with respect to student income. As a result, most districts, but especially high-poverty districts, had access to resources and could provide a standard of educational services not possible in the past. However, given the nature of these funds, establishing many long-term employment contracts using temporary stimulus funding could place these districts in financial turmoil down the road.

Appendix Table A3 shows differences in the mechanisms through which school districts hired new staff, by district type, based on the summer 2021 survey. While higher-poverty districts and those serving higher percentages of students of color were more likely to expand hires for tutors and IT

professionals (Table 2), Appendix Table A3 shows these districts were more likely to use contracted services for new hires, while districts serving more historically advantaged students more often relied on full, long-term contracts. This approach may have been financially wise for high-poverty districts, which were supported during the pandemic with temporary stimulus funds but calls into question these districts' ability to maintain services beyond September 2024, which stimulus funds are required to be spent (Malkus, 2021). Rather than face a fiscal cliff, as some have warned (Lieberman, 2023), many high-poverty districts may simply be forced to let temporary contracts expire for their tutors, paraprofessionals, and IT professionals. In other words, given temporary hiring practices reported in our survey data, high-poverty districts may be able to avoid the financial challenges of a fiscal cliff when ESSER funds expire, but may instead face an educational support cliff if additional funds are not provided, and many temporary contracts are non-renewed.

Discussion and Implications

This study associates the equity-oriented practices seen in school leaders' crisis response to the pandemic as being supported by the creation and implementation of equity-oriented provisions at the district level. We noted three broad areas of equity-driven policies and practices implemented at the district level: *ensuring equitable access through direct services, making changes to curriculum and instructional practices, and expanding schools' capacity to address equity*. In light of these findings, this study contributes to our understanding of how districts responded to the exacerbated inequities from the pandemic, and how these responses likely impacted equitable access at the school level. Our contributions are discussed below.

First, we contribute to the emerging literature on education leadership and policymaking at the district level during the pandemic. The emerging literature on schooling during the pandemic has overwhelmingly focused on how the pandemic impacted student test scores and engagement, teacher burnout, leadership responses, among other areas. Much less known, however, is how districts responded to the challenges created by the pandemic, and how these responses likely impacted equity at the school and community levels (Grooms & Childs, 2021). This study identified practices enacted by districts in response to the pandemic. Given the reality that students from marginalized identities were more likely to be affected by the pandemic and experience greater academic losses (Curriculum Associates, 2020; Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020b, 2020b; Hammerstein et al., 2021; K. Lewis et al., 2021), the responses reported in this paper likely advanced equity access for these students.

As seen in our findings, a greater proportion of school districts enacted practices that we considered to be equity-oriented after the pandemic, suggesting an attentiveness to the exacerbated inequities. Likewise, the increased provision of services such as changes to grading policies, increased hiring in certain areas, and capacity building demonstrate practices that districts serving high populations of marginalized groups could adopt to support their equity efforts. These practices among others, are likely to have advanced equity by virtue of the population of students mostly likely to have benefited most from these services. Given these results and other research findings, we agree with scholars that the pandemic created a window of opportunities to reimagine current educational structures (Farmer-Hinton & Closson, 2023; Jackson, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Roy, 2020; Zhao, 2020). To this end, these findings suggest important roles for district leaders and staff in the fight against systemic inequities. Given the important role played by districts in shaping what goes on across schools, district should consider investing in equity-directors, district-level administrative personnel responsible for designing and implementing initiatives to improve the experiences and outcomes of marginalized students (Irby et al., 2022). Using this position or office, districts could leverage greater resources and support for schools serving high proportions of marginalized students through provisions illuminated in this analysis in a post-COVID world. Further, this position could facilitate a more direct relationship between district and school leaders, and greater responsiveness to the school-based issues affecting historically underserved students.

We also offer important implications for leadership preparation programs, especially those geared toward district leadership roles such as the superintendent. On one hand, school leaders are street level bureaucrats who implement the policies created at the district level. However, they must be critically aware of the experiences of marginalized students to avoid translating district mandates to their respective context in ways that further disadvantage these individuals. Additionally, they must be prepared and emboldened to challenge policies and practices that perpetuate inequities against marginalized students (Jackson et al., 2024). On the other hand, much of what principals are allowed to do is regulated by district leaders. Barbara and Krovetz (2005) remind us that "principal[s] cannot be expected to succeed in achieving equity unless it is also an expressed priority of the district" (p. 13). Acknowledging that district leaders are important actors in enabling and supporting principals' capacity to advance equity, leadership preparation programs must attend to their preparedness to enact systems-focused equity leadership[2] (see Honig & Honsa, 2020).

While the findings from the current study suggest that districts became more responsive to equity during the pandemic, these findings must be interpreted through the study's limitations. First, the current analysis relied on pre-collected data from the American School District Panel surveys collected by RAND American Educator Panels. As such, the survey instruments were not designed with the aims of the current study in mind. Consequently, our analysis of districts' practices and policies during the pandemic were limited to the questions asked in the surveys. A second and related limitation derives from the type of data analyzed for this study. The data analyzed provides no justification for why districts expanded some services versus others. As a result, our arguments are underpinned by empirical evidence that points to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on marginalized students, causing these individuals to struggle with access issues, and therefore, were more in need of support and resources to facilitate their engagement (DeMatthews et al., 2023; Dorn et al., 2020a; Haderlein et al., 2021). In light of these realities, we associate the prioritization of provisions likely to mediate inequitable access for these individuals as being undergirded by equity.

Mindful of these limitations, the study also offers directions for further research. Future research should employ qualitative or mixed-methods to further probe districts' COVID-19 responses and to understand the extent to which equity influenced the responses noted in the study. These studies should also consider school leaders' perceptions of the support received at the district level during the pandemic, and how these supports enabled their equity-oriented responses to the pandemic. Further, given the study's one-dimensional focus on access which Gutiérrez (2012) warns is an inadequate portrayal of equity, it is worth considering the impact of district responses on other dimensions of equity such as student outcomes (). Another important direction for future research is whether the policies enacted to mediate inequitable access across schools will be sustained or abandoned in a post-pandemic world. In other words, researchers should examine whether the decisions made about equitable access during the pandemic at the district and school levels will survive the COVID-19 era of educational reform and federal funding. Should future studies report districts' continued investment in provisions that promote equitable access such as wide adoption of credit recovery programs and one-on-one tutoring, then support can be provided for arguments that the pandemic has created a window of opportunity to address equity. In contrast, and to our anticipation, the looming "*ESSER Funding Cliff*" means school districts might no longer be able to sustain some of the provisions aimed at equitable access as reported in this study (Malkus, 2021).

Notes

1. Throughout this article, the terms district and school districts will be used to refer to both district offices and Charter Management Organizations.
2. The ability to lead systemic changes in educational systems that improve educational opportunities and outcomes for historically underserved students (Honig & Honsa, 2020, p. 194).

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

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Appendices Appendix A

Table A1. Percent of districts and CMO's in the U.S. offering various instructional services before and during COVID, by district student racial demographic, 2020–21 school year.

	Pre-COVID						COVID	
	All districts/ CMOs	Majority White	Majority Non-White	Diff.	All districts/ CMOs	Majority White	Majority Non-White	Diff.
Hotspot or subsidies for home internet	51.5% (0.030)	46.4% (0.040)	62.6% (0.043)	0.162*	60.1% (0.029)	53.4% (0.040)	74.9% (0.039)	0.215***
1:1 computing for K-5	48.2% (0.030)	41.5% (0.039)	63.0% (0.043)	0.215***	71.5% (0.027)	65.7% (0.038)	84.0% (0.033)	0.183**
1:1 computing for 6–12	41.7% (0.029)	20.1% (0.032)	57.9% (0.044)	0.237***	82.8% (0.022)	27.4% (0.035)	93.3% (0.022)	0.153**
On-demand IT support	26.5% (0.026)	20.1% (0.032)	40.5% (0.044)	0.203***	33.9% (0.028)	27.4% (0.035)	48.2% (0.045)	0.209***
Weekend meal provision	13.7% (0.020)	10.9% (0.025)	19.9% (0.036)	0.089*	22.0% (0.025)	78.1% (0.033)	93.3% (0.022)	0.105*
Workshops for parents	12.7% (0.020)	12.5% (0.026)	13.2% (0.030)	0.007	47.0% (0.030)	36.5% (0.038)	70.1% (0.041)	0.336***
Liaison at most or all schools	6.4% (0.015)	6.0% (0.019)	7.5% (0.024)	0.016	23.4% (0.025)	17.8% (0.030)	35.7% (0.043)	0.179***
Student/family choice in electives	6.0% (0.014)	6.0% (0.019)	6.1% (0.021)	0.001	40.8% (0.029)	38.8% (0.039)	45.3% (0.045)	0.065

Table shows the percentage of District and CMO's responding yes to questions about providing services before and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic on Summer 2021 ASDP Survey. This table replicates the results shown in Figure 1, except that results are disaggregated by district's student racial demographic.
* $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Table A2. Percent of districts and CMO's in the U.S. offering various instructional services before and during COVID, by district student racial demographic, 2020–21 school year.

	Pre-COVID				COVID			
	All districts/ CMOs	Majority White	Majority Non-White	Diff.	All districts/ CMOs	Majority White	Majority Non-White	Diff.
One-on-one tutoring	8.9% (0.017)	7.2% (0.021)	12.5% (0.029)	0.053	54.7% (0.029)	50.9% (0.040)	62.7% (0.043)	0.118+
Small group tutoring	9.9% (0.018)	9.4% (0.023)	11.0% (0.028)	0.016	75.3% (0.025)	70.7% (0.036)	85.4% (0.031)	0.147**
Reduced class size	10.0% (0.018)	10.0% (0.024)	10.0% (0.027)	0.000	32.6% (0.028)	34.3% (0.038)	28.9% (0.040)	−0.053
Increased class size	32.6% (0.028)	0.9% (0.007)	0.0% (0.000)	−0.009	1.6% (0.007)	2.1% (0.012)	0.3% (0.005)	−0.019
Credit recovery	4.9% (0.013)	2.4% (0.012)	10.4% (0.027)	0.011	58.0% (0.029)	56.9% (0.039)	60.4% (0.043)	−0.015

Table shows the percentage of District and CMO's responding yes to questions about providing services before and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic on Summer 2021 ASDP Survey. This table replicates the results shown in Figure 2, except that results are disaggregated by district's student racial demographic.
+ $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table A3. Percent of school districts and charter management organizations reporting expanded hires by the 2021–22 academic year, by contract type, staff category, and district context.

| | All Districts | | | | By District Context | | | | | | | | |
| | Primarily increased district-employed staff | Primarily increased contracted staff | Do not employ these staff | We employ these staff, but did not incr. FTE | Primarily increased district-employed staff | | | Primarily increased temp. contracted staff | | | Do not employ these staff | | |
					High P/B/L	Low P/B/L	Diff.	High P/B/L	Low P/B/L	Diff.	High P/B/L	Low P/B/L	Diff.
Paraprofessional	46.4%	6.1%	1.0%	46.5%	45.6%	47.1%	−1.5%	7.0%	5.3%	1.7%	1.1%	0.8%	0.3%
Substitute Teachers	39.4%	14.9%	0.6%	45.0%	37.9%	40.8%	−2.9%	17.6%	12.7%	4.9%	0.3%	0.9%	−0.6%
Tutors	26.5%	7.1%	23.2%	43.2%	27.4%	25.7%	1.7%	11.6%	3.3%	0.083**	18.6%	27.2%	−0.087+
Information Tech. Professional	19.4%	5.5%	1.5%	73.7%	23.8%	15.6%	0.082+	7.2%	3.9%	3.3%	2.3%	0.8%	1.5%
Virtual school teachers	18.5%	3.5%	41.9%	36.1%	22.4%	15.2%	0.072+	4.1%	3.0%	1.1%	37.7%	45.6%	−7.9%
School sec./admin. assistants	12.3%	1.0%	0.7%	86.0%	18.2%	7.2%	0.111**	0.0%	1.9%	−0.019+	0.6%	0.8%	−0.2%

Results based on the RAND American School District Panel Fall 2021 Survey. The first four columns show the percent of district leaders nationally reporting expanded hires for each staff type, disaggregated by the type of new contract (including categories for districts that did not expand hires, or do not employ those staff types). Percentages in the first four columns sum to 100%. The next set of columns show the same information disaggregated by district context, where High P/B/L refers to school districts enrolling greater than 50% of students classified as low-income, or greater than 50% of students who identify as Black or Latinx. + $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.