



Best Practices in High-Performing Schools

Fiscal Year 2021

Report to the Legislature

As required by Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, subdivision 4

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Table of Contents

For more information:.....	2
Legislative Charge.....	4
Introduction.....	4
Analysis.....	6
The measurements.....	6
Theme 1: Response to contextual factors.....	7
Theme 2: Communication.....	8
Theme 3: In-person health and safety.....	9
Theme 4: Academic focus.....	11
Conclusion.....	12

Legislative Charge

This report is consistent with the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, subdivision 4, which states, “Consistent with the requirements of this section, beginning June 20, 2012, the commissioner must annually report to the public and the legislature best practices implemented in those schools that are identified as high performing under federal expectations.”

Introduction

For students, families, educators and schools across Minnesota, uncertainty about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the final months of the 2019-20 school year and the summer of 2020. New information about the virus led to evolving rules and guidance at the federal and state levels. School and district staff strove constantly to protect the health and safety of their students, staff and communities, and provide the highest quality education possible in a world of newly implemented approaches to instruction (whether in-person, distance, or hybrid).

During these early months of the pandemic, one key measure of great interest to schools was how effectively they were able to keep students enrolled. As schools heard from families who were interested in online options, homeschooling and enrolling across district boundaries, many schools worked hard to maintain and strengthen their connections with students and families. Schools’ success keeping students enrolled was a prerequisite for their ability to effectively provide academic instruction in the 2020-21 school year.

The challenges to maintaining enrollment posed by the pandemic were different during the last quarter of the 2019-20 school year than they were over the summer. The end of the school year was a time of rapid transitions to remote learning (disrupting the lives of students, families and staff), significant curiosity from families, and strained logistics. Schools worked with varying degrees of success to connect students with whatever technology or other resources were necessary for their local approach to distance learning. Schools reported that the summer, by contrast, posed significant risks of losing touch with students and families or of driving families to pursue alternative places of learning as they learned about local plans for the upcoming school year. The summer also saw a spread of the pandemic to many communities not impacted during the previous school year.

Schools that were able to sustain their enrollment during both of these critical periods—the end of 2019-20 and the summer before 2020-21—were well-positioned to serve their students going into the 2020-21 school year. Students would experience greater social stability at a time when few other aspects of their lives were stable. The school and district would experience greater continuity of resources due to the amount of funding attached to student enrollment. Families would be more likely to be starting from a place of trust that could serve as a foundation for ongoing partnership in support of students’ health and learning during the school year. Across these dimensions and more, continuity of enrollment offered a key advantage to the schools able to achieve it.

In the context of the early pandemic, then, sustained enrollment is itself a form of high performance. As more academic outcome data become available, it will be possible to more thoroughly analyze schools that saw high academic performance during the pandemic. At the time of writing, however, this focus on enrollment is more

feasible and, arguably, an important contribution to understanding the conditions necessary for reliable academic performance as Minnesota moved through the pandemic.

This report therefore focuses on the schools that did best during both of the critical time periods for sustaining their enrollment. The schools analyzed were selected using two measurements. The first measurement looked at schools' ability to sustain enrollment through the end of the 2019-20 school year, while the second calculated the percentage of students who returned for the 2020-21 school year after summer 2020. In total, 44 schools were in the top quintiles of both metrics. Staff from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) contacted these school and district leaders to gain their perspectives on what most significantly contributed to their ability to sustain enrollment during both of these critical periods. The Schools Demonstrating Sustained Enrollment table lists the 44 schools in both top quintiles as well as the districts in which they are located.

Schools Demonstrating Sustained Enrollment

District or Charter School Network	School
Albany Public School District	Albany Area Middle School
Anoka-Hennepin Public School District	Oak View Middle School
Barnesville Public School District	Barnesville Elementary School
Benson Public School District	Benson Secondary School
Blue Earth Area Public School	Blue Earth Area Elementary School
Byron Public School District	Byron Intermediate School
Delano Public School District	Delano High School
Dover-Eyota Public School District	Dover-Eyota Middle School
Edina Public School District	Normandale Elementary School
Edina Public School District	Valley View Middle School
Esko Public School District	Lincoln Secondary School
Esko Public School District	Winterquist Elementary School
Hastings Public School District	Hastings Middle School
Hawley Public School District	Hawley Elementary School
Hayfield Public School District	Hayfield Elementary School
Hills-Beaver Creek School District	Hills-Beaver Creek Secondary School
Holdingford Public School District	Holdingford Elementary School
Houston Public School District	Houston Elementary School
Kittson Central School District	Kittson Central Elementary School
Lanesboro Public School District	Lanesboro Elementary School
Lewiston-Altura Public School District	Lewiston-Altura Intermediate Elementary School
Marshall County Central Schools	Viking Elementary School
Minnetonka Public School District	Minnetonka West Middle School
Minnewaska School District	Minnewaska Area Intermediate School
Minnewaska School District	Minnewaska Area Junior High School
Nova Classical Academy	Nova Classical Academy Lower School
Orono Public School District	Orono Intermediate Elementary School

District or Charter School Network	School
Orono Public School District	Orono Middle School
Osakis Public School District	Osakis Secondary School
Pierz Public School District	Pioneer Elementary School
Pine Island Public School District	Pine Island Elementary School
Robbinsdale Public School District	School Of Engineering-Arts At Olson
Rochester Public School District	Friedell Middle School
Rochester Public School District	Lincoln K-8 Choice Elementary School
Rocori Public School District	Rocori Middle School
South Washington County School District	Cottage Grove Middle School
South Washington County School District	Lake Middle School
St. Croix Preparatory Academy	St Croix Preparatory Academy Middle School
St. Croix Preparatory Academy	St. Croix Preparatory Academy Lower School
St. Louis Park Public School District	Park Spanish Immersion Elementary School
St. Michael-Albertville School District	St. Michael-Albertville Middle East
Stillwater Area Public School District	Oak-Land Middle School
White Bear Lake School District	Central Middle School
Zumbrota-Mazeppa School District	Zumbrota-Mazeppa Elementary School

Analysis

After efforts to contact all of the schools, interviews conducted with 18 of the 44 identified schools revealed four common themes:

- response to contextual factors
- communication
- in-person health and safety
- academic focus

Not every school identified each theme during its interview. Many schools that experienced declines in enrollment may have acted in accordance with one or more of the themes. These themes are presented (after a brief description of the measurements used to identify schools) as a starting point for understanding potential best practices. Significant, additional research over the coming years will add to the understanding of what was most helpful to schools in maintaining enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The measurements

Separate measurements were calculated for the two critical time periods for sustaining enrollment. Data for both measurements came from final data that districts and charter schools reported to MDE through the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS).

Enrollment through the end of 2019-20

The first measurement calculated the percentage of students who were enrolled at a school before May 2020 and completed the school year there. For the 44 schools identified, these rates ranged from 97.4 to 100%.

Returning for 2020-21

The second measurement calculated the percentage of students who completed the 2019-20 school year at a school and returned in fall 2020. Student enrollment was checked in early September and on October 1, 2020, with students counting as returning if they were enrolled at both times. By contrast, a student who was nominally enrolled on the first day of school but left the school before the end of September would not count as returning to the school. Students in the highest grade at a school at the end of 2019-20 (for example, eighth grade in a school serving grades six through eight) were not included in this calculation, as they would not be expected to return. For the schools identified, the return rates ranged from 94.7 to 97.5%.

Theme 1: Response to contextual factors

One theme that appeared in multiple interviews was the school's response to contextual factors, meaning those factors they could not quickly change in the early months of the pandemic. One set of contextual factors came from outside the school or district in the form of state and federal actions that created parameters for the school's response. The second set of contextual factors was local, relating to the existing relationships, reputations and trust the schools had built up in the years before the pandemic. While schools couldn't directly control these factors after the pandemic began, they could control the way they responded to those factors.

1a. State and federal actions

Multiple school leaders mentioned the importance of adapting their school's actions in response to rules, recommendations and resources from the state and federal government. Over the course of the early months of the pandemic, schools experienced shifting requirements and recommendations around masking, social distancing, surface cleaning and the difference in risk between indoor and outdoor activities. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided some additional new funding that could be used for technology, staffing and other purposes.

Effective responses to these actions in the context of maintaining enrollment involved several elements. One element was ensuring that decisions complied with new requirements while continuing to meet local community expectations around safety and instruction. Another element was the strategic use of the new resources to meet local priorities, such as providing students with the devices and connectivity needed for online learning, or hiring additional staff in preparation for socially distanced instruction during in-person learning times in 2020-21. A final element was effectively engaging with families during decision-making and communicating clearly about the ultimate decisions.

For many schools, the engagement and communication with families about these state and federal actions were fraught, given the wide range of perspectives in their communities. Several schools relied on the state and federal requirements as an explanation for why they had to make certain choices, especially when

communicating with families more skeptical of the requirements. At the same time, schools would be very clear about requirements around quarantining and staying home when sick, which was critical to maintaining health in schools, and reassuring families leery of schools growing too lax about student safety.

1b. Existing relationships, reputations and trust

When the pandemic began, each school started with its own relationships, reputation and level of trust with its own community. These social factors are the result of time and are not easily changed quickly for large numbers of families. School leaders in many different types of settings (traditional districts and charter schools, communities in the Twin Cities region and in Greater Minnesota) mentioned the importance of these existing social connections as providing a foundation for their response to the pandemic.

A school could see its relationships with students, families and community members improve or worsen over the course of the pandemic. Those shifts in relationships brought corresponding changes to its reputation and the level of trust it received, and schools that started with strong relationships and a good reputation often saw families be somewhat more willing to listen to plans for responding to the pandemic. Additionally, individual relationships became critical to several schools when following up with each student and their family to ensure all needs were being met.

Of course, a school's relationships and reputation at the start of the pandemic were not developed randomly. Schools that had invested time and effort in building strong relationships and demonstrating their level of caring to families also had more practice and comfort adapting the methods they'd used in the past to the new circumstances of the pandemic. This experience proved important in diverse schools that had already spent significant time combining a focus on equity with attention to relationship-building and engagement.

A less common example of schools responding to their existing relationships and levels of trust involved schools with waitlists (which made up a very small number of identified schools), where families knew that returning to the school would be difficult if they were to leave. One final example involves schools reaching out to one another across sectors in the same community (traditional public district schools, charter schools and private schools) to stay in touch during the pandemic and commit to not attempting to seek out the others' students for recruiting.

Theme 2: Communication

Of all of the themes discussed in this report, communication was the most likely to be brought up first by interviewed leaders. When discussing effective communication, leaders often discussed using multiple modes of communication, maintaining a high frequency of communication, and working strategically with their staff to persist in efforts to communicate, especially with students and families who proved hardest to reach.

2a. Modes of communication

School leaders discussed multiple forms of communication used during the end of the 2019-20 school year and during summer 2020. These communications included online meetings, automated phone calls made widely, individualized phone calls made strategically, emails, and in some cases, home visits, among other forms.

Several leaders mentioned focusing on reaching students and families from whom they had not heard back after one or more attempts.

2b. Frequency of communication

Many schools communicated regularly with their students and families about decision-making and plans. With the goal being to reach all students and families, combining a high rate of contact attempts with the varied modes of communication proved helpful.

2c. Persistence of communication

A final related component of the communication strategies discussed by school leaders was an effort to continue reaching out to students and families whom they initially struggled to reach. Some school leaders described tiered or specialized strategies. For example, individual teachers who had relationships with particular students or families provided follow-up communication if initial widespread efforts were unsuccessful. In other schools, specialized teams—whether made up of mental health staff, teachers or paraprofessionals—would conduct the additional follow-up efforts. While the exact form varied by school, the core idea of persisting in efforts to communicate ran through many schools' experiences.

Theme 3: In-person health and safety

Most of the interviewed schools prioritized having safe in-person offerings for students (and communicating those opportunities ahead of the 2020-21 school year). That this priority proved successful in retaining enrollment is not surprising, since finding logistically feasible options for in-person education is often more difficult for families than trying multiple online settings. Nonetheless, maintaining a heavily in-person approach to learning required significant effort, especially with nearly every school doing so also seeking to reassure families who were concerned about the safety of their students during in-school instruction.

Finding an approach to in-person instruction that was appealing to local families looked somewhat different in each community. Most successful efforts combined an adaptable, creative approach to health with instructional design choices meant to meet student, family and educator needs as effectively as possible in the context of a pandemic. These efforts often also included a strong response to potential infections, with the result that no interviewed schools reported any significant outbreaks among their students or families. Another key enabling feature in many schools was the use of existing staff and resources, and the application of new resources to meet their local needs.

While many of the details provided by schools focused on the steps taken for students' physical health and safety, several leaders also discussed the importance of mental, social and emotional health as part of their communication strategies and one of the driving reasons behind offering as much in-person learning as possible.

3a. Adaptability and creativity

Several school leaders discussed changes made to their use of space to allow for socially distanced learning. Some discussed using spaces not generally designed for traditional classroom learning, such as gymnasiums or

outdoor spaces, as ersatz classrooms, which often required significant adaptation from teachers. Another common need for adaptation revolved around mealtime, with new scheduling and a repurposing of hallways or other spaces into room for tables as frequent steps taken to ensure students could eat in safety.

Additionally, some leaders discussed ways of adapting their approaches to the new rules around masks. For example, a school might find frequent opportunities for students to be outside and unmasked. These types of adaptations were described as important for younger learners (who were also the most likely to be in the buildings).

In other cases, specialized programs (such as magnet schools) intentionally set up online programs that mirrored their in-person programming as closely as possible to continue providing services to families who were concerned about health but also wanted the specialized program the school offered. These schools then created opportunities for families to transition back to hybrid or in-person learning models based on their comfort with the school's approach.

3b. Instructional design

Changes in the use of space also involved corresponding changes in the delivery of instruction. For example, schools that spread students in the same class between two classrooms might project a teacher's lesson from one classroom into the other while additional staff supported classroom management in the second classroom. Additionally, given the possibility of students needing to leave school to quarantine, coordinating the timing of instruction between online delivery and in-person delivery was identified as a way of keeping students learning effectively. By making decisions like these and communicating them clearly and frequently to families over the summer, schools were able to sustain their enrollment as families made choices about where students would go to school in fall 2020.

3c. Response to potential infection

Another aspect of reassuring families about the safety of in-person learning opportunities was demonstrating how seriously the school took potential infection of students. Multiple leaders described making clear to families that any sick student should not come to school and following through by sending students home immediately if they did show symptoms of COVID-19. This level of responsiveness to the virus, communicated clearly, helped some schools maintain their enrollment into the beginning of the 2020 school year.

3d. Staff and resources

The core of every school's response involved their staff, including administrators, educators, paraprofessionals, school nurses, guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists, and many more. From developing safety protocols to adapting instructional techniques to engaging students and families, school staff were central to the school's response. In some cases, schools used new funding sources from the federal or state level to hire new staff. In others, district funds were repurposed to prioritize keeping staff in place to sustain the educational and social-emotional programs of the school.

Beyond staffing, other key resource concerns fell into two primary categories: technology to support online learning, and additional materials needed for safe, socially distanced in-person learning (with hybrid learning models requiring both). Schools relied heavily on existing resources, supplemented in some cases with new funding sources and—at least in some cases—with materials donated by families and community members to support in-person learning. These donations included weather-resistant chairs, tables and other materials for expanded outdoor learning activities.

Theme 4: Academic focus

One message most schools shared when communicating with their students and families was the ongoing commitment to high-quality education. This commitment was sent implicitly through decisions about how academics would continue to be conducted and explicitly in communications from the school.

4a. Cohort-level supports

One academic approach mentioned in some schools was to cluster students in cohorts or pods to minimize their exposure to other students and reduce the risk of spreading the virus. Doing so, especially in settings where teachers offered specialized subjects, could involve a variation on an approach described earlier, with one teacher presenting their material to multiple classrooms through technology, while other staff supervised the students in each classroom that didn't have the presenting teacher. However schools implemented this approach, forming small cohorts was one way of demonstrating to families a commitment to keeping students learning together in school while still taking steps to preserve student health.

4b. Consistent instructional mode for educators

Another approach adopted by some schools was to have many of their educators either teach only in person or only online. Doing so reduced the amount of time and mental energy required to switch between modes, allowing staff to more effectively develop and deliver their instruction. Communicating about this approach early provided reassurance to families that the school was prioritizing academics for students, regardless of the learning model the family chose.

Where this sort of specialization was not feasible for most or all staff, some schools would ensure a dedicated online learning lead for each grade level, who would then regularly synchronize their work with multimodal and in-person teachers. Prioritizing consistency between the online and in-person spaces sent a message to families that, even if a student needed to quarantine, their learning was still being kept on track with their in-person peers.

4c. Academics as a priority

“Talking the talk” of prioritizing academics was often an important companion to “walking the walk” of genuinely doing so. Schools that went out of their way to reinforce to families they were taking their academic program seriously tended to see a positive response from those families.

Conclusion

Much more remains to be learned about best practices across many dimensions of performance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the data available at the time of writing, some of the themes identified in this report may continue to be found significant in schools that most successfully navigated the pandemic. While maintaining enrollment through the early months is far from the only aspect of a school's performance that matters, it remains a likely indicator of a higher probability of success in later years.

The four themes of responding to contextual factors, communicating effectively with students and families, planning to support many dimensions of students' health and safety, and demonstrating a consistent commitment to academics provide a foundation for future improvement. They can be starting points for analysis of how schools approached the pandemic, and they can inform preparations for other potential disruptions to students' educational experiences (even those not on the scale of a global pandemic).