



RESEARCH BRIEF

Spotlight on Charter Management Organizations: Barriers, Supports, and Approaches to Distance Learning

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APRIL 2021

In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led schools across the country to close their doors and transition to distance learning, causing sudden shifts in how educational institutions provide instruction, leadership, and support to their students and families.

To better understand how public educational institutions responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a nationally representative survey. The [National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19](#) was sent to leaders in approximately 260 charter management organizations (CMOs) and 2,500 traditional public school (TPS) districts in late May 2020.¹ Results for TPS districts appear in a collection of research briefs published between July 2020 and February 2021, which are available on the project page linked above. This is the first brief to focus on CMOs.

In this brief, we highlight survey responses from 91 CMO leaders, representing 48 high-poverty CMOs and 43 lower-poverty CMOs.² Specifically, we explore organizations' barriers to distance learning, supports for distance learning, and approaches to distance learning in spring 2020. Although we do not draw direct comparisons between CMOs and TPS districts due to differences in the communities they typically serve (e.g., National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), we do briefly juxtapose the CMO findings with relevant TPS findings in the conclusion section. We then provide recommendations for CMOs as they navigate the remainder of COVID-19 and transition into the post-COVID era.

About This Brief

- This brief examines charter management organizations' (CMOs') experiences with distance learning in spring 2020.
- The CMOs surveyed in this study ranged in size from three schools in a single city to more than 50 schools spread across the United States.
- Results are based on survey responses from 91 CMO leaders, representing 48 high-poverty CMOs and 43 lower-poverty CMOs.
- Findings suggest that many CMOs were able to provide supports such as digital devices and family resources to address barriers to distance learning in spring 2020.
- CMO approaches to remote instruction took many forms in spring 2020, with the most prevalent strategies including digital learning materials, virtual classes, and prerecorded lessons.
- The experiences of CMOs differed by poverty level across all three topics of interest: barriers, supports, and approaches to distance learning.

Barriers, Supports, and Approaches to Distance Learning

The widespread shift from in-person to distance learning in spring 2020 brought about challenges of limited technological access, lack of family capacity to support students at home, inadequate teacher preparation for delivering online instruction, and more—challenges that affected students and families nationwide. However, sources such as the Rutgers Global Health Institute (Rutgers University, 2020) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) suggest that low-income, Black, and Hispanic communities have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 due to their overrepresentation in essential work settings and heightened susceptibility to severe illness, among other factors. Therefore, students and families in these communities may have experienced greater challenges in accessing the resources and supports needed for a successful transition to distance learning. These challenges also have implications for CMOs, as charter schools tend to serve higher proportions of low-income, Black, and Hispanic students than the average TPS (e.g., National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Despite the challenges associated with the transition to distance learning, evidence suggests CMOs were able to support students and families in various ways during this shift. Boast et al. (2020) authored a case study that identified five common ways the profiled schools adapted to better support their students: (1) prioritizing relationships and outreach, (2) expanding the role of the school, (3) continuing academic learning, (4) adapting how learning happens, and (5) implementing a feedback loop.

In another qualitative study of charter school responses to COVID-19, Vanourek (2020) noted the characteristics of the CMO structure that may have allowed such schools to adapt quickly and effectively:

The charter networks come not only with the autonomy embedded in chartering but also with some centralization that allows them to make quick decisions, such as about remote learning design principles, teaching teams, and revamped calendars, and then drive those decisions across their schools. (p. 47)

To better understand CMOs' experiences with distance learning in spring 2020, this brief explores survey data from a representative sample of CMO leaders on the topics of barriers to distance learning, supports for distance learning, and approaches to distance learning. We report experiences overall and separately for high-poverty CMOs and lower-poverty CMOs.

Barriers to Distance Learning

Over half of CMO leaders (56%) indicated “limited access to digital devices (e.g., desktop computer, laptop, tablet)” was a barrier for “many” or “all or almost all” of their students and families at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1A). Similarly, nearly half (45%) of CMO leaders indicated “limited access to reliable internet connection” was a barrier for “many” or “all or almost all” students and families during this time (see Figure 1B). When asked to identify their most pressing challenges, nearly all respondents mentioned lack of internet connectivity, especially for low-income students.

In addition to these technological barriers, 64% of CMOs reported that “limited capacity of family members to support student learning at home” was a barrier for “many” or “all or almost all” students

and families at the start of the pandemic. High-poverty CMOs were more likely than lower-poverty CMOs to report limited family capacity as a barrier (see Figure 1C). This finding aligns with the discussion above (page 2), as low-income workers are disproportionately represented in jobs that cannot be done remotely (e.g., Rutgers University, 2020), preventing them from being home to support their children’s learning.

Supports for Distance Learning

During the spring 2020 school closures, CMOs offered a variety of supports to students and families in an effort to address the aforementioned barriers to distance learning. Most CMOs (81%) reported providing digital devices to all families who needed them (see Figure 2A), and more than half (53%) indicated they provided internet access (e.g., mobile hotspots, service installation). High-poverty CMOs were more likely than lower-poverty CMOs to report providing internet access to all families who needed it (see Figure 2B).

In addition to these technological supports, 85% of CMOs reported providing “guidance and resources to help families support student learning at home” (see Figure 2C), and many CMOs (60%) indicated they provided “interpreters or family liaisons to communicate with and support multilingual families” (see Figure 2D). When asked about promising practices, CMO leaders described new strategies for communicating with families, including virtual events such as townhalls, parent–teacher conferences, webinars, and focus groups. One organization reported making home visits to check on students and families during the spring 2020 school closures. Although such examples are encouraging, most came from lower-poverty CMOs, and survey results demonstrate discrepancies in family communication by school poverty level (see Figure 2C).

Approaches to Distance Learning

On average, CMO leaders indicated that their students were expected to spend approximately 4 hours per day on instructional activities in spring 2020, and this expectation did not significantly differ for high-poverty versus lower-poverty schools. CMOs reported using the following distance learning strategies as primary components of instruction during this time:

- 75% had students work on digital learning materials (e.g., materials that were emailed or posted on a website, Google Classroom, Canvas).
- 60% had students attend virtual classes (e.g., via Google Meet or Zoom) taught by their teacher on a fixed schedule.
- 41% had students watch lessons prerecorded by a teacher in their organization and made available online (e.g., YouTube, Google Classroom).
- 37% had students attend virtual tutoring sessions with their teacher at scheduled times.
- 34% had students attend virtual “office hours” with their teacher on an as-needed basis.
- 32% had students work on digital activities from an external source (e.g., websites like National Geographic, programs like Khan Academy, or courses from vendors like Edgenuity).
- 25% had students work on physical learning materials (e.g., paper packets, worksheets, textbooks).

As demonstrated above, CMO approaches to remote instruction took many forms in spring 2020. The most prevalent strategies included digital learning materials, virtual classes, and prerecorded lessons. High-poverty CMOs were more likely than lower-poverty CMOs to report using asynchronous approaches such as virtual office hours and prerecorded lessons.³ However, high- and lower-poverty CMOs reported similar use of synchronous virtual classes (see Figure 3). These findings suggest that high-poverty CMOs may have used a greater variety of instructional approaches, but this did not lessen their abilities to offer synchronous instruction in spring 2020.

One CMO leader detailed how their organization (referred to as “district” below) used a variety of strategies to successfully meet the needs of students:

With the COVID-19 shutdown, our district was forced to purchase a large number of Chromebooks to service our student population. In turn, our teachers developed online learning platforms, through Google Classrooms and Canvas. As a district, we purchased web-based software through Edgenuity as a platform moving forward for virtual learning for our summer programs. All of this together has groomed our learning experiences to evolve into a blended learning environment to meet our students’ needs—virtually and in a brick-and-mortar setting.

Conclusion

The data collected by the [National Survey of Public Education’s Response to COVID-19](#) demonstrate that charter schools across the country experienced challenges such as limited technological access and family capacity to support distance learning in spring 2020. Despite these challenges, most CMOs indicated they supported their students and families with digital devices and distance learning resources, and more than half reported providing internet access. In addition, most CMOs used digital learning materials and synchronous virtual classes as primary components of their instructional approaches.

While these findings—along with evidence from Boast et al. (2020) and Vanourek (2020)—exemplify the successes of many CMOs in spring 2020, comparisons between high-poverty and lower-poverty CMOs highlight discrepancies. High-poverty CMOs were more likely than lower-poverty CMOs to provide technological supports to all families that needed them; however, high-poverty CMOs were also more likely to face limited family capacity as a barrier to distance learning, and they were less likely to provide guidance and resources to help families support student learning from home. These discrepancies were present despite the autonomy and centralization of charter networks described by Vanourek (2020).

The findings presented in this brief are not unique to CMOs. TPS districts also reported challenges such as limited technological access and family capacity to support distance learning in spring 2020, and high-poverty TPS districts were more likely than low-poverty TPS districts to indicate that these barriers affected “many” or “all or almost all” of their students and families. Similar to CMOs, many TPS districts addressed these barriers by providing digital devices (77%) and distance learning resources (68%) to all students and families, and some (38%) provided internet access. TPS districts also used instructional strategies that were similar to those used by CMOs, with the most prevalent strategies including digital learning materials (68%) and virtual classes (51%). These findings highlight the commonalities in CMO

and TPS district responses to COVID-19. Readers who wish to explore TPS district responses in more detail may do so using AIR's [interactive data tool](#).

Moving forward, educational leaders should engage in resource sharing practices to minimize discrepancies in barriers, supports, and approaches to distance learning by poverty level. For example, if educational institutions with greater capacities to develop and distribute guidance and resources to families were to share these resources with the greater public education community, then all students and families could benefit from these materials. In addition, educational leaders should continue to explore various instructional approaches, paying particular attention to how approaches overlap with and build on each other. Such an understanding may promote more widespread development of the “blended learning environment,” which one respondent described as a way to successfully meet the needs of students, both in the classroom and at home. The autonomous yet centralized nature of CMOs may make them particularly suited to implement these forms of innovation, not only through the remainder of COVID-19 but also as we move into the post-COVID era.

Figure 1. Barriers to Distance Learning in Spring 2020 by CMO Poverty Level

Percentage of CMOs for which the following limitations were barriers for “many” or “all or almost all” students and families

Figure 1A. Limited access to digital devices

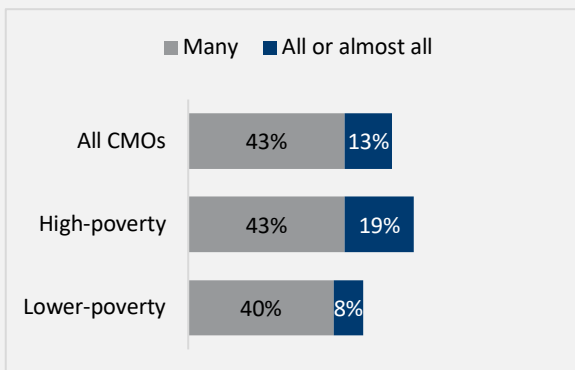


Figure 1B. Limited access to reliable internet connection

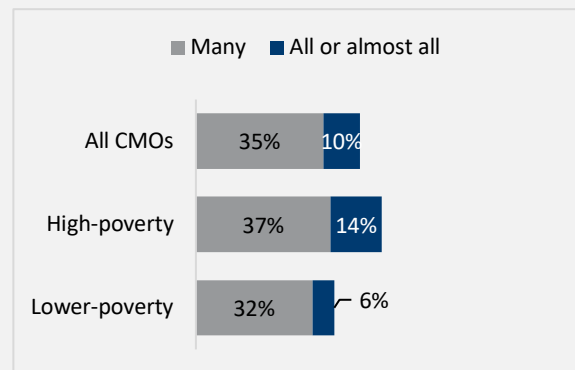
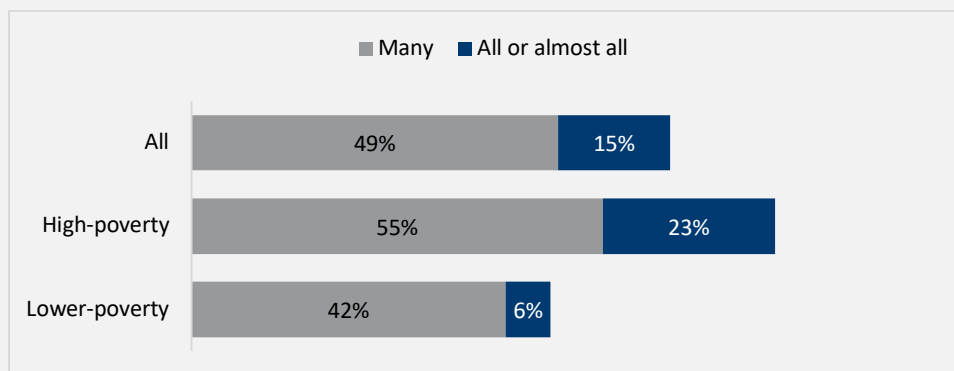


Figure 1C. Limited capacity of family members to support student learning at home*



* Difference between high- and lower-poverty CMOs was statistically significant ($p < .10$).⁴

Notes. These results summarize survey responses from 91 total CMOs: 48 high-poverty CMOs and 43 lower-poverty CMOs. Respondents were asked to estimate how many students/families in their organization faced each barrier to distance learning at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Response options included: “Very few or no students/families (less than 10%),” “Some students/families (10–25%),” “Many students/families (25–75%),” or “All or almost all students/families (more than 75%).”

Figure 2. Supports for Distance Learning in Spring 2020 by CMO Poverty Level

Percentage of CMOs that provided the following supports to all families who needed them

Figure 2A. Digital devices

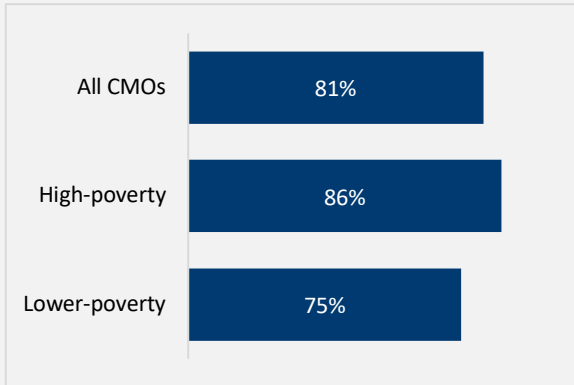


Figure 2B. Internet access*

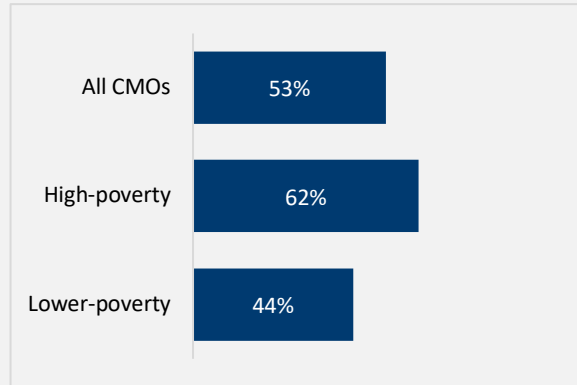


Figure 2C. Guidance and resources to help families support student learning at home*

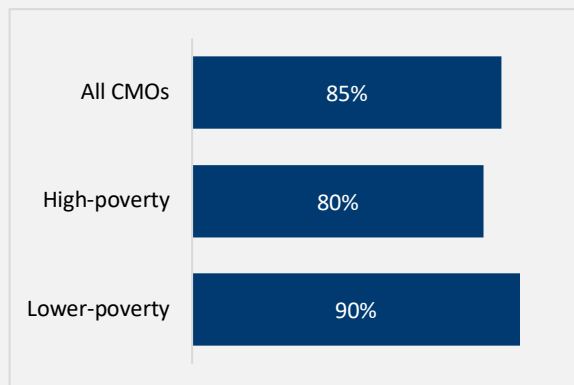
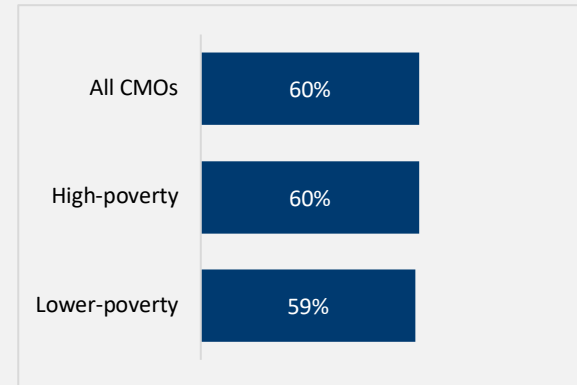


Figure 2D. Interpreters or family liaisons to communicate with and support multilingual families



* Difference between high- and lower-poverty CMOs was statistically significant ($p < .10$).⁴

Notes. These results summarize survey responses from 91 total CMOs: 48 high-poverty CMOs and 43 lower-poverty CMOs. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which their organization provided each type of support for distance learning during the spring 2020 school closures. Response options included: a) “No,” b) “Yes, for some families who needed it,” c) “Yes, for all families who needed it,” and d) “We provide this to all families year round.” For the purposes of this brief, we combined response options c and d to determine the estimates presented above.

Figure 3. Approaches to Distance Learning in Spring 2020 by Student Grade and CMO Poverty Level

Figure 3A. Percentage of CMOs that used each strategy as a primary component of instruction for students in grades K–5

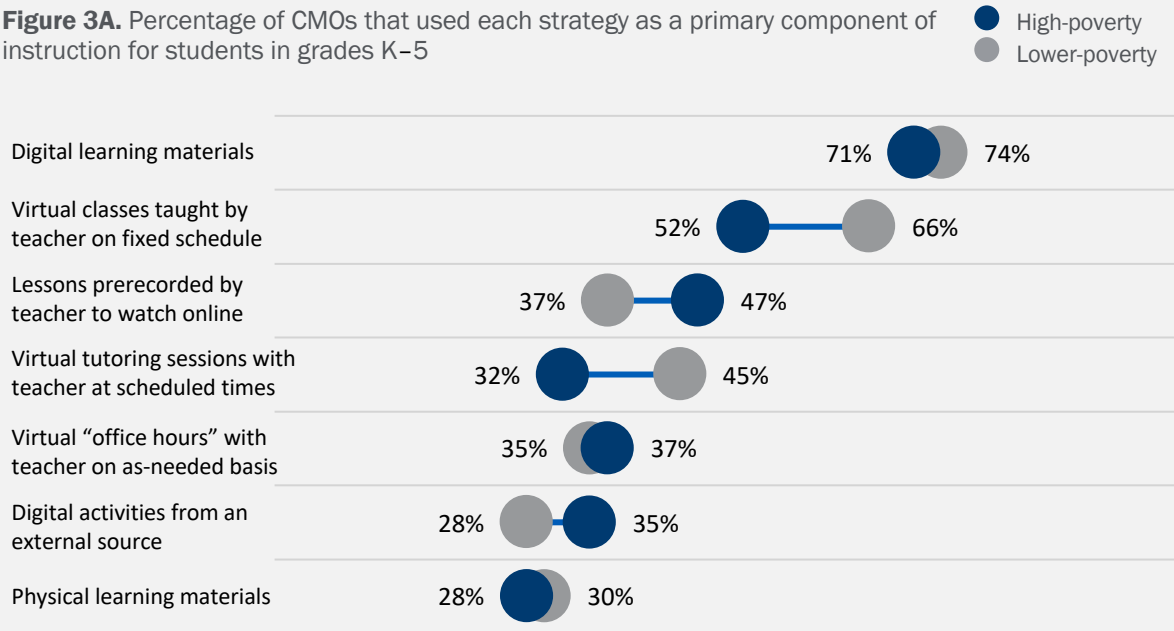
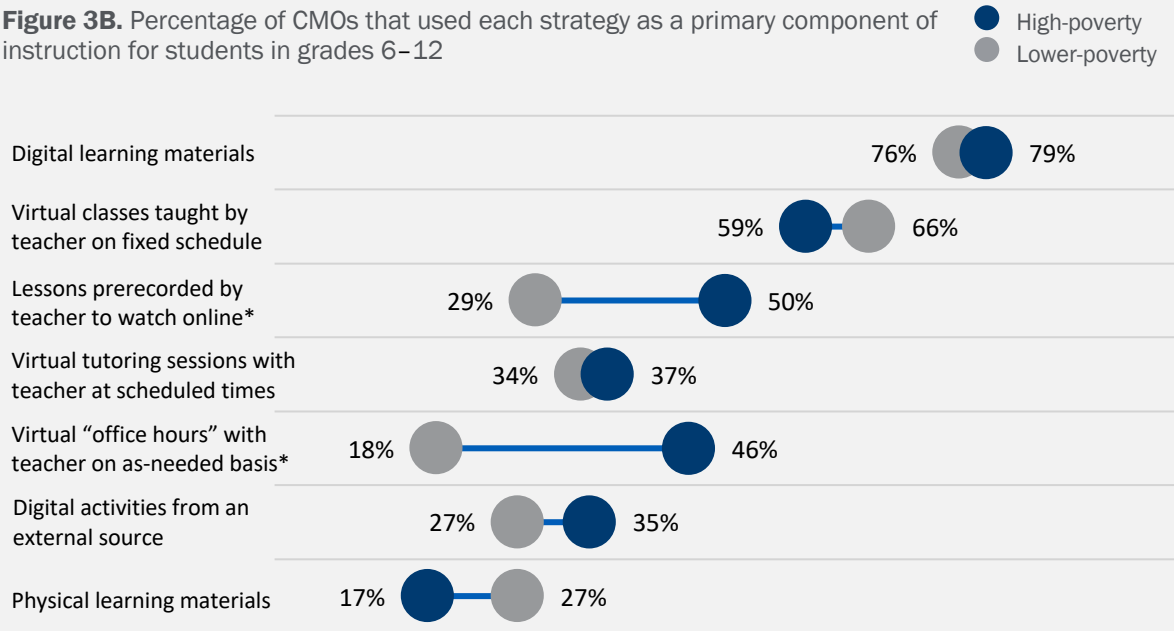


Figure 3B. Percentage of CMOs that used each strategy as a primary component of instruction for students in grades 6–12



* Difference between high- and lower-poverty CMOs was statistically significant ($p < .10$).⁴

Notes. These results summarize survey responses from 91 total CMOs: 48 high-poverty CMOs and 43 lower-poverty CMOs. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each activity was a part of their organization’s strategy for delivering distance learning in spring 2020. Response options included: “No, not part of our strategy,” “Yes, as a way to supplement instruction,” and “Yes, as a primary component of instruction.”

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Endnotes

¹ AIR funded and led the development of the survey, which was administered by our partner NORC at the University of Chicago. The CMO sample included all CMOs with at least 3 schools in their network (N = 257) according to data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. The survey was open between May 20 and September 1, 2020, and 91 CMOs responded during that time. The results reported in this brief use weights to adjust for nonresponse based on characteristics of the CMOs (e.g., geographic region, number of schools, and student demographics). More information about the survey methodology is available in a technical supplement.

² We used 2017–18 data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools to determine CMO poverty level. We defined high-poverty CMOs as those in which more than 75% of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). This definition aligns with the standards of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). We defined lower-poverty CMOs as those in which 75% or less of the students were eligible for FRPL. This definition combines the NCES groupings of low poverty (25% or less FRPL) and medium poverty (25% to 75% FRPL) to account for small sample sizes.

³ This trend was observed for both grade brackets (K-5 and 6-12); however, differences in the instructional approaches of high- and lower-poverty CMOs were not statistically significant for grades K-5 (see Figure 3).

⁴ We defined statistically significant findings as those with a p-value of less than 0.10 instead of 0.05 to account for small sample sizes.



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