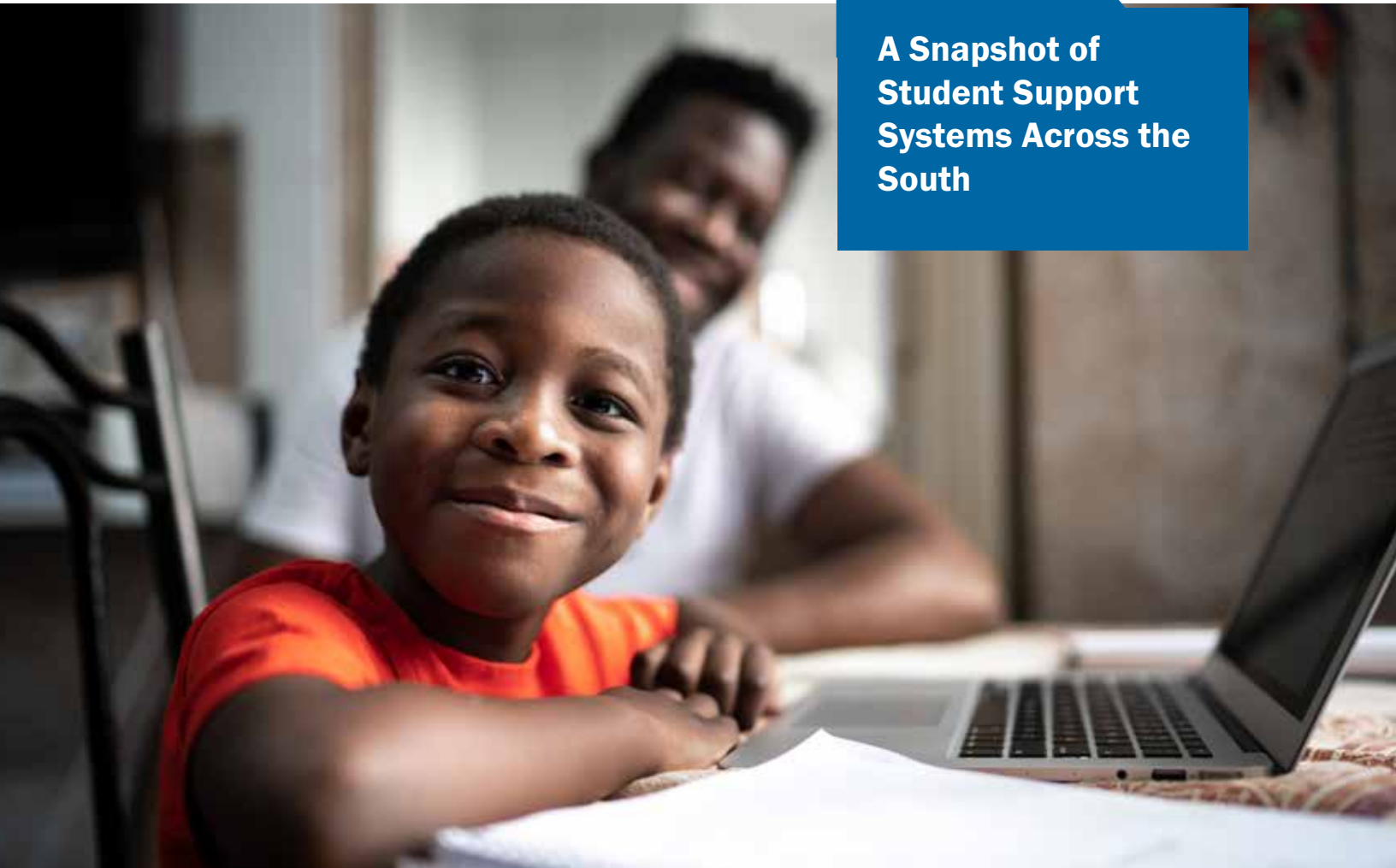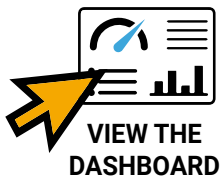# DISTANCE LEARNING
EQUITY DASHBOARD

A Snapshot of Student Support Systems Across the South

AUTHORS: TITILAYO TINUBU ALI AND SUJITH CHERUKUMILLI

VIEW THE DASHBOARD

AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC INTENSIFIED in the spring, school and system leaders throughout the South rapidly pivoted toward distance learning. The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) sought to understand how these districts were keeping equity issues at the center of their plans. Our team began by publishing **Distance Learning During COVID-19: 7 Equity Considerations for Schools and Districts**, an

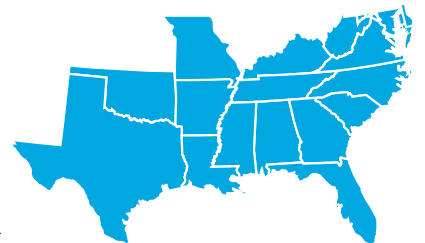issue brief highlighting ways schools and districts were meeting the needs of their most vulnerable students. We then developed the **Distance Learning Equity Dashboard** to track, across 20 indicators, how districts were providing academic, social-emotional and other wraparound support to students, as well as how they were supporting teachers and parents in navigating the transition to distance learning.

Thirty-one of the 48 districts in the Dashboard have leaders who are part of SEF's **Racial Equity Leadership Network**[1]—superintendents and administrators from districts that educate a higher percentage of Black students and students from low-income families than both the South and the nation as a whole, and who engage with SEF to improve academic opportunities and outcomes for these students. The remaining 17 districts include some of the largest districts in the southern states SEF covers. Nearly 44 percent of the students enrolled in the evaluated districts are Black, while 21 percent are Hispanic or Latinx and 3 percent are Asian. In comparison, of students in the South's public schools, nearly 23 percent are Black, 27 percent are Hispanic or Latinx, and 4 percent are Asian.[2] On average, 67 percent of students in DLED-evaluated districts receive Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL), compared with 57.1 percent of public school students in the South. Thirteen percent of students in DLED districts have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and 10 percent are English Language Learners (ELLs). The districts included in the DLED are not a regionally or nationally representative sample; the DLED is a descriptive snapshot of 48 districts across 20 states which reflect the demographics of southern school districts and include a mix of rural and urban districts.

Ensuring access to fast and reliable internet connection has proven to be among the most vital requirements for equitably administering distance education during COVID-19.

Access to experienced, high-quality, credentialed teachers is also important for students engaged in distance learning.

We selected districts that have large proportions of Black students and FRPL-eligible students because we seek to highlight the ways in which longstanding inequities are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. For example, ensuring access to fast and reliable internet connection has proven to be among the most vital requirements for equitably administering distance education during COVID-19. However, we know that six percent fewer Black children have access to the internet at home than their White peers.[3] Additionally, access to experienced, high-quality, credentialed teachers is also important for students engaged in distance learning. While many teachers struggled with the transition to distance learning, those with more experience, qualifications, and knowledge about teaching in unconventional ways may have

been able to transition to distance learning more easily. We know, however, that Black children and other children of color are four times more likely to be taught by an uncertified or inexperienced teacher than their White peers.[4] This Dashboard is not intended to be evaluative or prescriptive; it is a resource and guide for school districts to help them identify and work toward the best ways to implement equitable distance learning that addresses the needs of students, families, faculty, and staff. SEF will update the Dashboard on an ongoing basis as states and school districts share their plans for the Fall and other new information becomes available.

OUR SCAN UNCOVERED FOUR KEY THEMES:

1 **Most school districts made expanding access to WiFi and technology a priority, regardless of available resources.**

Eighty-one percent of the districts reviewed (39 of 48) had some plan to increase students' access to WiFi. Almost all those

districts worked with internet providers to offer free services to low-income families; the remainder led the efforts themselves. For example, **Charleston County School District** in Charleston, South Carolina and **Edgecombe County Public Schools** in Tarboro, North Carolina deployed WiFi-equipped school buses to a number of areas throughout the school district to provide access to families without internet at home. District officials in Charleston also equipped 15 schools in the district with extended outdoor WiFi access. **Fairfax County Public Schools** in Falls Church, Virginia distributed individual MiFi (mobile WiFi) devices to families to help them get connected at home. Even among the districts that engaged in public-private partnerships with telecommunications companies, many struggled and had to supplement digital learning materials with paper learning packets, highlighting the need for more equitable resource distribution.

2 **Nearly every school district prioritized social and emotional learning and mental health support for students. This support wasn't as clearly identifiable for teachers.**

The majority of school district sites SEF reviewed had clear and helpful social and emotional learning resources for students and families attempting to cope with the mental health side effects of COVID-19, including written resources and virtual hotlines and telehealth services. Eighty-five

percent of districts scanned in the Dashboard (41 of 48) offered social and emotional learning resources, additional mental health resources, or virtual hotlines and telehealth services for students and families. **Cedar Hill Independent School District** in Cedar Hill, Texas set up a 24-hour crisis hotline and also provided students with contact information for dedicated counselors at each school. Many districts, such as **Fayetteville Public Schools** in Fayetteville, Arkansas, provided links to external social and emotional learning and mindfulness resources, while others, such as **Jefferson County Public Schools** in Louisville, Kentucky created a list of tips and community-based resources for families to turn to.

Similar materials clearly intended for teachers and staff were not as common. Only 27 of 48 districts had some type of support available for teachers, with fewer

districts specifying that those supports are intended for teachers and staff members. One school district, **Rowan-Salisbury School System in Salisbury, North Carolina** provided particularly robust guidance for teachers and explicitly laid out pandemic-related mental health support for staff members. **Atlanta Public Schools**, Georgia provided six weeks of social emotional learning lessons to each grade band including lessons for teachers and leaders to help students process their emotions during this time. The district also provided support for teachers and staff through virtual Wellness Wednesdays and engaging with partners to provide yoga lessons and mindfulness experiences.

3 **Over time, more school districts began sharing plans for summer learning.**

SEF's initial review in April revealed that almost no district had a plan for summer learning but by June, 28 districts (58 percent) had some type of plan. The majority of DLED school districts publicly posted their summer learning plans and accompanying resources. The types of resources and programs offered vary, but nearly all focus on either enrichment, credit recovery, content knowledge, or a combination of each. **St. John The Baptist Parish Public Schools** in Louisiana, for example, created dedicated summer learning packets for each grade level, in addition to posting enrichment resources for different subject areas. Other school districts, including the **School District of**
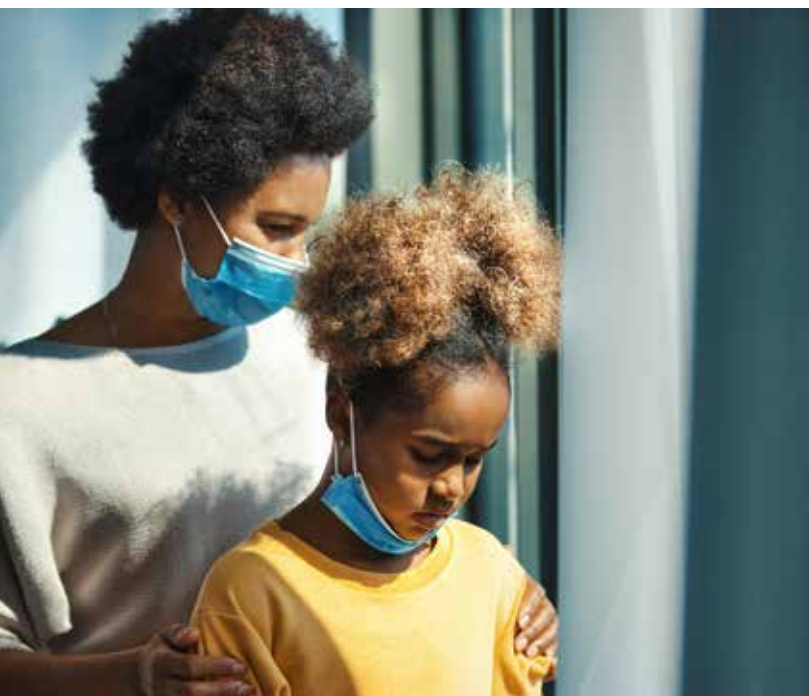
Palm Beach County in West Palm Beach, Florida, are broadcasting summer learning lessons in easily-digestible and accessible formats on either public broadcasting services or a dedicated, district-affiliated programming channel. **Miami-Dade County Public Schools,** one of the most intentionally-designed and targeted summer learning programs, offered two separate summer learning sessions and explicitly acknowledged the intention to prevent substantial learning losses during the summer months.

4. Rural school districts met fewer indicators than their urban and large suburban counterparts.

The disparity between rural and urban school districts in available resources to aid in the transition was evident. **Six of the 10 states** that are home to over half the nation's rural student population are in the South. The DLED includes rural districts in four of those states: Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina, and Texas. The DLED also includes rural districts in two other states: Louisiana and West Virginia.

The DLED revealed that large urban districts more often consistently update and post resources for students with disabilities, English language learners and students experiencing homelessness, and fulfilled more indicators than small and rural districts. We believe that rural districts' lack of resources is the likely

explanation for fewer rural districts meeting the indicators SEF used to determine districts' readiness to transition to distance learning. While rural districts in the DLED had higher overall per-pupil expenditures than adjacent urban districts, rural districts relied more heavily on state funds.[5] With impending cuts to

state education budgets over the next two fiscal years and without additional federal support, compared with their urban counterparts, rural districts will have to rely more heavily on their already limited local dollars to respond to COVID-19 with adequate resources for students, families, and staff members.

We recognize that information available on websites may not reflect the totality of districts' efforts. Limited capacity and connectivity may have impeded some rural school districts' efforts to update their websites with the most relevant and

up-to-date information regarding their COVID-19 distance learning plans. For example, the website for **Hazlehurst City School District** in Hazlehurst, Mississippi does not include much information specifically related to COVID-19, but a deeper exploration of their district and the programs it offers for students reveals that there is more work happening than is being reflected online. Similar observations can be made about **Bullock County Schools** in Union Springs, Alabama, and **East Jasper Consolidated School District** in Heidelberg, Mississippi. In contrast, large urban school districts such as **Hamilton County Schools** in Chattanooga, Tennessee and **Metro Nashville Public Schools** in Nashville, Tennessee consistently update and post resources for students with disabilities, English language learners, and students experiencing homelessness. Based on the information on both districts' websites, the DLED reflects that both Hamilton County Schools and Metro Nashville Public Schools have met all but one indicator. Other large urban and suburban school districts, such as **Houston Independent School District** in Houston, Texas and **Jefferson Parish Schools** in Harvey, Louisiana also fulfilled nearly every indicator on the Dashboard.

We do not believe that the disparate responses to COVID-19 we observed between rural and urban school districts are indicative of the effort put toward their respective responses to the pandemic. Rather they may be symptomatic of resource inequities between school districts, and, in some cases, the result of limited resources to make their plans visible online.

As state legislatures make decisions about public education budgets for the coming fiscal year, the DLED can serve as a roadmap to inform education funding priorities. While we believe that each equity indicator we scanned holds its own importance in determining the quality of students' distance learning experiences, the four we highlighted above will be critical focal points in upcoming conversations related to state and federal funding for public education.

Where available, we included fall reopening plans for districts in each of the 20 states in our Dashboard. Each state's plan includes approaches such as staggered reopenings, hybrid learning models, and social distancing on transportation routes and in school facilities, but we recognize that another wave of COVID-19 cases may complicate these plans. We will update the Dashboard as states and school districts determine how they will reopen in the fall.

Finally, we intend the Dashboard to serve as a tool for facilitating thoughtful conversations about education equity, not an evaluative rubric designed to assign grades or judge school districts on the depth and breadth of their responses to COVID-19. Together, the indicators in the DLED encompass a significant amount of unexpected work that district leaders, educators, and support staff members had to do in a very short period of time. In most cases, education professionals had one week or less to figure out how they would take their courses online while continuing to address the needs of their most vulnerable students. SEF would like to thank the nation's dedicated education professionals—administrators, support staff members, teachers, transportation workers, and food service workers—for their tireless efforts to provide for their students during this crisis. We would also like to thank the school district leaders who responded to our requests for feedback on our Dashboard and provided us with additional information to help us develop a more complete tool. SEF

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[1] Four of the districts in the Dashboard are located in the Midwest and Northeast because there are RELN members in those states.

[2] National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Table 203.50. Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2029.* [Data set] Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_203.50.asp?current=yes

[3] National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Figure 4. Percentage of children ages 3 to 18 with no internet access at home, by selected child and family characteristics: 2010 and 2017.* [Data set] Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cch.asp.

[4] Cardichon, J., Darling-Hammond, L., Yang, M., Scott, C., Shields, P. M., & Burns, D. (2020). *Inequitable opportunity to learn: Student access to certified and experienced teachers.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/CRDC_Teacher_Access_REPORT.pdf

[5] SEF analysis of per-pupil expenditures (PPE) for rural school districts and adjacent or nearby urban school districts; PPE data sourced from state education agency websites for AL, LA, MS, NC, TX, WV

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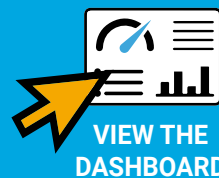
This Dashboard is a living resource and will be updated continuously as new information becomes available. We hope you find it useful.

Southern Education Foundation, founded in 1867, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supported by partners and donors committed to advancing equitable education policies and practices that elevate learning for low-income students and students of color in the southern states. We develop and disseminate research-based solutions for policymakers and grow the capacity of education leaders and influencers to create systemic change.