

# Distance Learning and Online Coordination of Services in PA Rural Schools during COVID-19

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## The Context

- Schools are at the center of communication in rural communities.
- Rural schools have long faced insufficient funding and other barriers to online education.



# The Problem

- The COVID 19 pandemic disrupted community/school relations and exposed vulnerabilities in the ability of rural schools to provide:
  - Distance education
  - Essential non-educational services



## Demographics

- In 2018, 26% of the state's residents, lived in Pennsylvania's 48 rural counties. (U.S. Census Bureau)
- There are 235/500 rural school districts in PA
- Enrollments range from 200 to nearly 10,000 students



## Purpose of Our Study

- Understand the specific problems that rural school districts encountered during the pandemic.
- Learn how these districts responded to their unique challenges.
- Identify the policies, practices, and resources that are needed for PA rural schools in the event of future emergencies.



# Data Collection Tasks

- Website Analysis
- Central Planning Documents Analysis
- Identification of Specific Barriers or Challenges and Specific Practices or Resources (Survey and Focus Groups)
- Identification of Helpful Policies (Delphi Study)



## Focus Groups and Delphi Study

Two focus groups with rural  
superintendents, IU  
Directors and other leaders

A Delphi study of 28 rural  
school administrators, school  
board members, parents and  
teachers



## Focus Group -“No one thought initially about long term closures.”

“It was really a tremendous feeling of uncertainty, because there was no timetable at that point given, and we weren’t sure if schools would be closed for a week or for two weeks. No one thought initially about long term closures.”

On March 13, 2020 Governor Wolf ordered that all K–12 Pennsylvania schools would close due to the COVID pandemic. Our respondents anticipated receiving information from the Secretary of Education earlier that morning during a statewide meeting, but there was no mention of school closings during that meeting. This left rural districts “on their own” to map out strategies and mobilize resources

## Focus Group - “School districts became the hub of the community.”

Suddenly, school districts became the center for community information about the pandemic, but also provision of multiple social services. One superintendent noted: “I was personally responding to 100 emails a day from parents concerned about losing their jobs, feeding their children, finding day care.”

“I think it showed the community, the power of the educational industry, the fact that, I think, we were the one stable thing that everybody could turn to in keeping families together, in keeping children fed.”



## Focus Group - Long-term Planning – Curriculum and PD

At the most basic level, districts established processes for distributing student learning packets via school pickup and distribution of materials at bus stops. Other districts centered their efforts on expanding access to Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Google Classrooms, taking inventory of the personal technology devices available within the school and in the homes, establishing processes for delivering devices to children and their families, and retooling teachers with professional development. This showed the wide range of differences in rural district needs

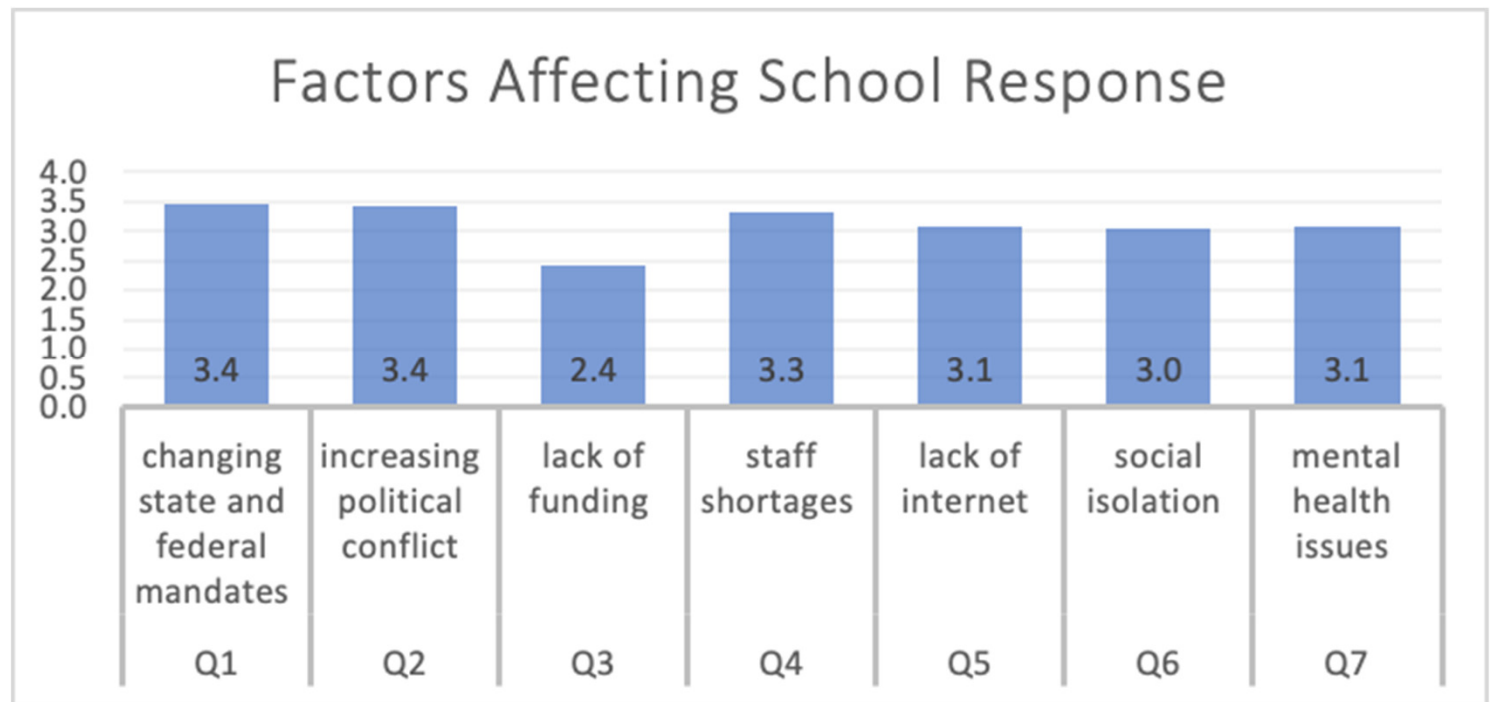
## Focus Group - Specific Recommendations

- A commitment from state legislators and policymakers to ensure that families in rural school districts have access to affordable, high-speed broadband internet;
- Changes to the Pennsylvania School Code provisions regarding instructional time and hours to better align with effective practices in distance learning, i.e., replace the 180-day requirement with competency-based standards;
- Allow more FID days, recognizing that school districts are now able to move from face-to-face to online learning formats more flexibly than ever before;
- Statewide professional development on course design and teaching strategies for an online environment.



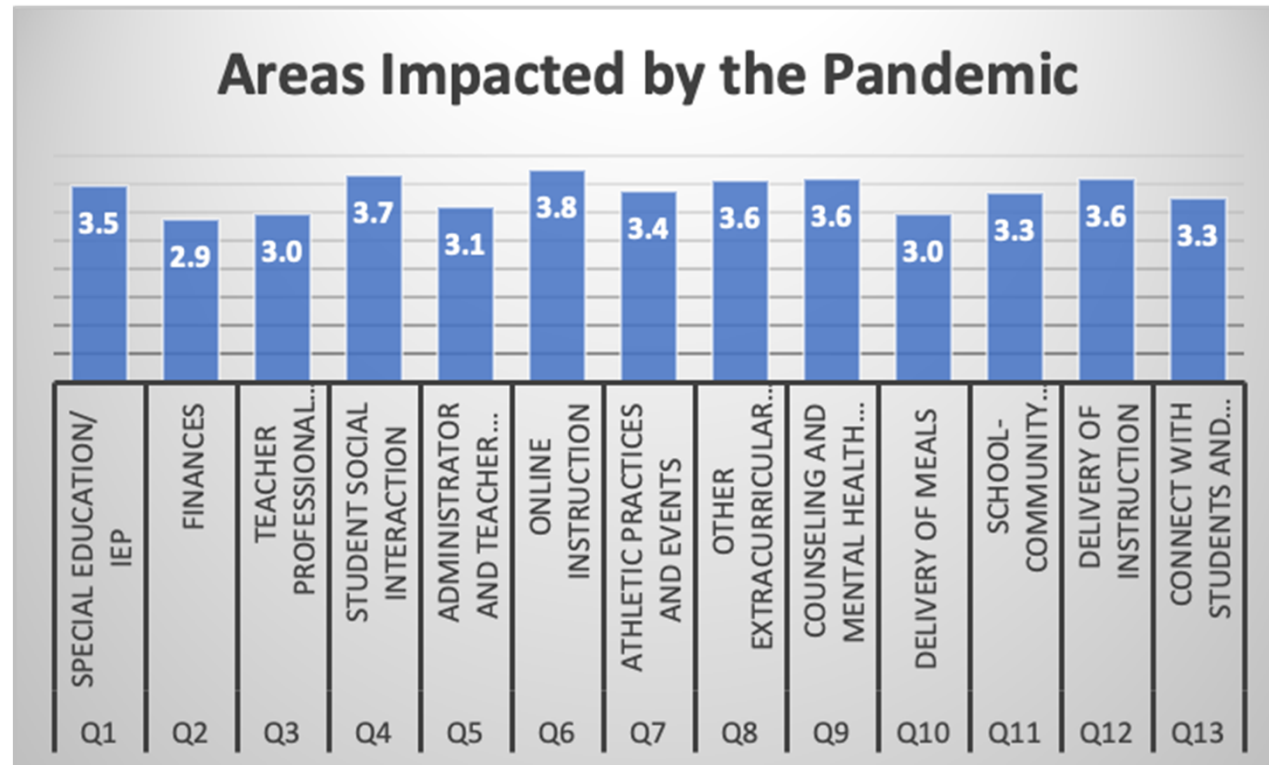
# Delphi Study - Factors that Affected School Response Capacity

- 1 = No Effect
- 2 = Some Effect
- 3 = Moderate Effect
- 4 = Major Effect



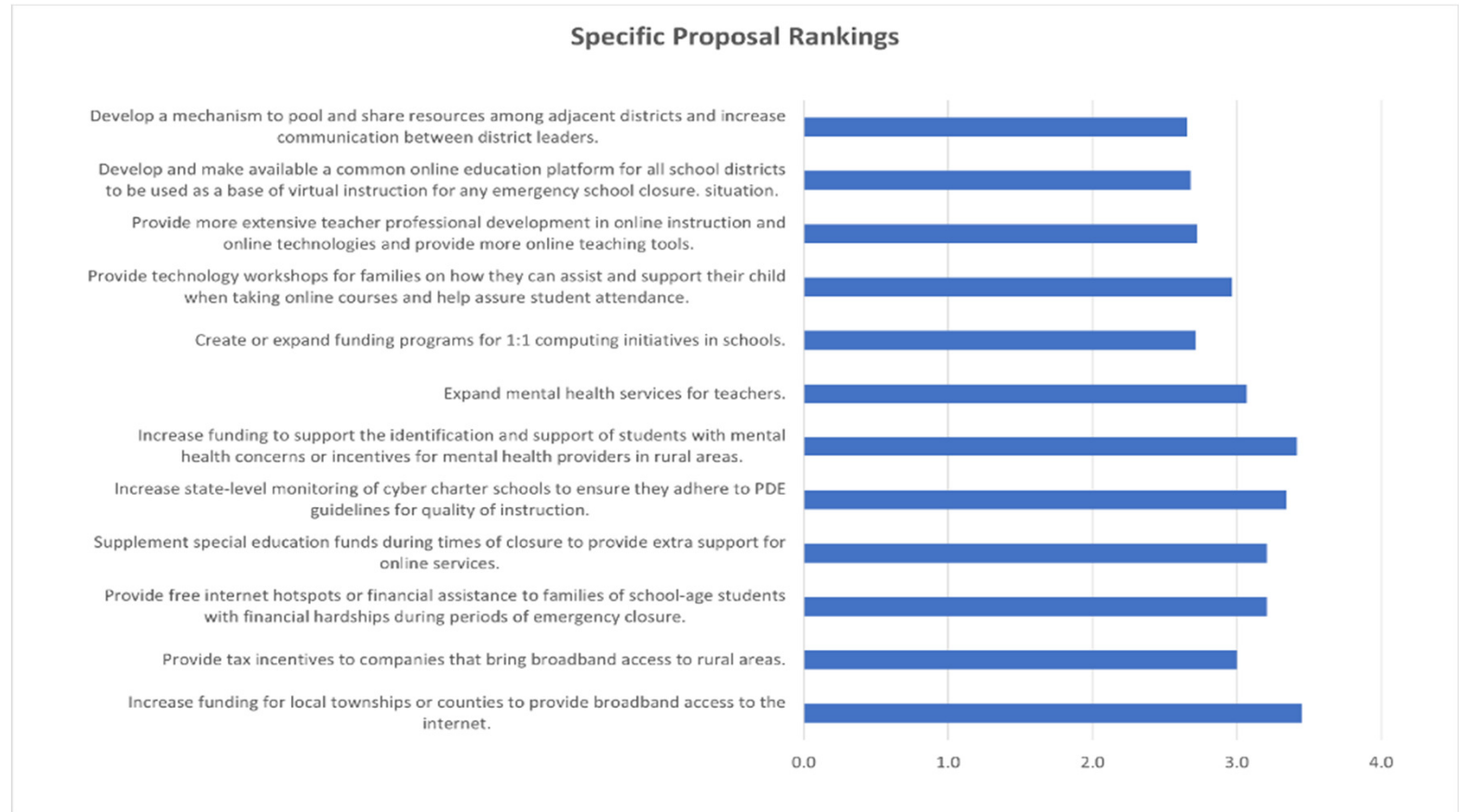
# Delphi Study - Areas of School Impacted by the Pandemic

- 1 = No Impact
- 2 = Minor Impact
- 3 = Moderate Impact
- 4 = Major Impact



# Delphi Study - Ranking of Policy Proposals

- 1 = Not a Priority
- 2 = Low Priority
- 3 = Moderate Priority
- 4 = Highest Priority



## Conclusion

Focus groups revealed each district struggled with unique challenges that reflected the incredible diversity of rural district conditions.

Administrators agreed that support for broadband access, modifications to the school code and increased PD were essential.

Delphi study showed strong support across stakeholders for key legislative reforms to support rural school districts.