

## Experts: educational equity in midst of a pandemic isn't easy

Linda Conner Lambeck - May 10, 2020

Superintendent Tamu Lucero, along with Mayor David Martin, announced Tuesday that all Stamford Public Schools, which includes Stamford High School, will continue providing education to students via distance teaching and learning through the end of the scheduled school year. The last scheduled day for students is June 16, 2020.

In Bridgeport, one of the state's most challenged school districts, laptops have been sent home. How many students are still without, district officials won't say.

It Waterbury, it was a struggle, but a health-compromised mom finally got her child a laptop for school work when an advocate intervened. Accessing the district's learning platform was another matter.

Across the state, students are logging in to distance learning, but are they actually learning — or even paying attention? In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, some wonder if the American right to an equitable education is even possible. Judging if it is, starts with data, advocates say. These days, data is hard to pin down — particularly when it comes to students who are disabled, homeless, living in detention centers, non-English speaking or living in poverty.

**"Just because there is such a gray area, it is not a license not to try or not give the students what they deserve," said Marisa Halm, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, a Connecticut-based watchdog agency.**

Sarah Eagan, Connecticut's child advocate, agrees. "If a certain percentage of students in a school district are not accessing education, we need to know that," Eagan said. To highlight inequities of marginalized population, Eagan said, there needs to be a foundation. Everyone needs a device, everyone needs access, she said.

Commissioner of Education Miguel Cardona said they need more. For some children with special needs, he told a Zoom panel on Friday, a laptop and internet connection means nothing if the students can't use them. "The need is for one-on-one services," he said, and for therapies that the current health crisis has made virtually impossible to deliver.

### A baseline

Nearly half of the state's 528,000 public school children are students of color, 43 percent qualify for free or reduced priced lunch, nearly 44,000 are learning English as a second language and more than 79,000 receive special education services.

While no one is getting the kind of education they would if they were still in school, Fran Rabinowitz, a former Bridgeport school superintendent and now executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, said students in large urban districts and students with disabilities are suffering the most. "Their needs have not been met in the way we want them to be met," Rabinowitz said, participating Friday in an online webinar hosted by Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut. Academic ground, Rabinowitz predicts, has been lost.

**Kathryn Meyer, an attorney in the Center for Children's Advocacy's Bridgeport office, worries also. Her struggle has been trying to get data from the Bridgeport School district. It is not for a lack of asking.** She knows that in Hartford, out of 18,097 students, 9,787 have devices provided by the school system and 5,810 have their own. Another 1,697 are tech free and 803 are unaccounted for by the system — according to that district.

In Bridgeport, Acting Schools Superintendent Michael Testani will only say that contact has been made with almost all of the district's 20,000-plus students. "The level of engagement varies day by day," Testani said on Friday.

Although the district has been accumulating data, Testani said he is hesitant to make it public. He is not sure how accurate the data is and worries how it will be interpreted. "Engaged and fully engaged are very different," Testani said.

The state, meanwhile, has a survey to gauge student connectivity and engagement on its short-term to-do list, state officials confirmed on Friday. Until that happens, advocates like Meyer have to go on what they hear and working with

parents who encounter issues and reach out to them, case by case. So far, Meyer said she has been able to resolve each issue. Testani, she added, has been very open to collaboration.

Yet, without data, Meyer said her firm can't advocate for Bridgeport students at the state level in the way it should. **"We are extremely concerned that Bridgeport Public School students will be left behind," Meyer said. "We need immediate data to identify who has device/internet access, who is engaged in schoolwork, and how they are progressing. This data will guide us moving forward."**

Meyer points out that other districts have Parent Centers to turn to when at-home issues arise. Bridgeport lost its Parent Center to a budget cut a few years ago

Parents have been told their first course of action when they need help is to contact their child's school. If that doesn't work, they should call the superintendent's office, Testani said.

### **Special ed concerns**

Last month, the US Department of Education re-emphasized that schools must "make every effort" to provide special education according to a child's individualized education plan.

Even in school districts like Oxford, where parents praise efforts the district's current administration has made to reach out to students and provide mandated services during the pandemic, it's been described as an exercise in making the best of an imperfect situation.

"Honestly, it's been great," said Heidi Kolvig, whose sophomore son has autism. In Oxford, there are online one-on-one sessions between teachers and students. Counselors have been in contact. The family held their annual Planning and Placement Team meeting virtually and on time.

"But I decided for myself we wouldn't create new goals," Kolvig said. She worries about regression. Goals will be set in the fall, when Kolvig hopes things are back to normal.

In New Haven, Typhanie Jackson, director of student services for the district, said: "Special education teachers are doing Herculean work. But inequities continue to perpetuate themselves. COVID-19 simply exacerbated things we know to exist." The issue is bigger than special education, Jackson said. It involves resource and funding gaps that existed long before COVID-19.

For now, Allison Lombardi, an associate professor of educational psychology in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut, said special education teachers trying to teach remotely should focus on what they can control.

They can communicate with families. They can sign up for help, not just through their district and the state, but through national organizations like the Council for Exceptional Children, which is currently offering free membership. "It is a place to turn for ideas," Lombardi said.

**Halm said parents deserve training too. "You can't expect a parent to understand all of a sudden the nuances of the interventions that take place in a school," she said.**

Annette Nunez, a licensed psychotherapist based in Colorado, who works with children on the autism spectrum, said in lieu of the therapies students aren't getting, parents and students, if they are able, should focus on skills to teach independence. "Not so much new skills, but how to function independently in the home," Nunez said. Sort of a "Plan B" IEP.

In Connecticut, the plan is to make up some lost ground in the summer, assuming social distancing mandates are loosened. Cardona and others say as soon as the all-clear sign is given by health officials summer school will start, and with populations most impacted by the interruption in education. A roll-out plan is expected later this month.

State Sen. Douglas McCrory, and Rep. Bobby Sanchez, co-chairs of the legislature's Education Committee, both vowed to fight for more funding to address the learning loss.

Work also needs to be done on what successful distance learning looks like going forward — with data, and with benchmarks, officials said.

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