

Hartford Courant

More than 5,000 Connecticut students who chose online-only learning haven't logged on for a single day of class

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OCT 19, 2020 AT 6:00 AM

More than 5,000 students across Connecticut who opted for online-only schooling have not logged on to a single day of class, according to state statistics, compounding issues of absenteeism that existed in urban districts before the pandemic and raising new concerns about the state's achievement gap widening.

State Sen. Doug McCrory, D-Hartford and co-chair of the legislature's education committee, said during a recent hearing with leaders of the state education department that he was "really concerned" about "very low" attendance numbers in some of Connecticut's largest school districts. McCrory, who has more than two decades of experience as an educator, chose not to name the districts but said school staff members have reached out to him about the issue.

"They're telling me that a lot of the children, even though we have done a great job of getting devices to them, they're not signing on," he said.

According to the education department, the state has provided students in need with more than 142,000 laptops, as well as internet access for about 60,000 households and 200 free public Wi-Fi hot spots across Connecticut in an effort to close the digital divide. The number of disconnected students is trending downward, but from Oct. 5-9, about 3.1% of remote students, or 5,165 in total, were still absent all week.

Regardless of a district's plan to reopen schools, parents were allowed to keep their children home for remote learning. Statewide and nationally, families in urban areas were much more likely than their suburban counterparts to do so, given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Hispanic communities.

In the state's 10 lowest-performing districts, called Alliance-Opportunity districts, 60.7% of students are learning remotely, compared to a statewide average of 32.9%. In the 23 other Alliance districts, 39% of students are learning remotely.

But beyond students who chose to take classes only online, the state is also concerned about making sure students engaging in hybrid models of in-person and online learning attend the virtual part of their schooling. "That's critically important, to make sure they're learning, or we're just going to exacerbate gaps," state education Commissioner Miguel Cardona said.

The state education department is developing new data collection systems that will allow for attendance to be tracked on a student-by-student basis. That program is expected to be launched later this month.

"One of the most important measurements to look at is chronic absenteeism, because it's so related to student engagement, student success and penetration into the juvenile justice system," said Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy, which helps children from low-income families overcome barriers to be successful in school. "When you already had issues of chronic absenteeism in these major districts, and then you overlay the COVID problems and connectivity problems, it's really important to get accurate measures not only for chronic absenteeism, but for student achievement, because they will both be affected. It's really important to measure it consistently and accurately."

Numbers lower than the spring, but still concerning

In Waterbury, where Gov. Ned Lamont announced the Everybody Learns Initiative to close the digital divide in July, Superintendent of Schools Verna Ruffin said that as of Oct. 8, about 250 of the district's 18,410 students remained disconnected. That number is much lower than the 30% to 35% of students who Mayor Neil O'Leary said struggled with technology and connectivity in the spring, but Ruffin said the district is still working constantly to figure out why some students are still missing from classes.

Ruffin explained that Waterbury, which is operating in a hybrid model, defines a disconnected student as any student who is not connecting with their teacher in-person or virtually. A virtual student who is considered disconnected by the district

may also have logged in once but not again, differing from the state's definition. Disconnected students in Waterbury may also be physically located within the district, but educators are unable to make a connection with them at home "in a manner that would allow instruction to go on," she said.

"We would definitely consider that a road map for the achievement gap to widen," Ruffin added, noting student disconnection is a sign that the school may need to involve a homeless coordinator. "It's indicative of a body of students that are not getting the same quality of instruction that the others are, whether they're in person or virtual," she said.

Remote students may also stop logging in because of a problematic computer, internet issues or because they moved to another district, she explained. If a student with a faulty device needs a new laptop or if a new student joins the district, they will need to wait for one of the computers on backorder to arrive. "Before you address it, you have to know what the cause is," she said.

According to the most recent district-specific state data available, about 980 online-only students in Hartford and about 1,340 in New Haven did not log on once during the week of Sept. 21-25. These numbers may continue to change as Hartford anticipates a shift from full in-person learning to hybrid learning if COVID-19 cases continue to rise locally, and New Haven plans for students to transition from fully remote education to hybrid learning starting Nov. 9.

In comparison to most districts, other cities and towns with larger populations of students who didn't log on that week included New London, Torrington and Windsor. Those districts reported 200-350 disconnected students each.

Preparing for 'full-blown disruption'

As they prepare for a potential resurgence of COVID-19 this fall, school districts say they're better prepared than they were in the spring to stay connected with students who may be forced to pivot to online learning if the state's coronavirus infection rate spikes.

The Consolidated School District of New Britain, which has about 10,000 students, is using virtual learning platforms Google Classrooms and Seesaw to track student participation. Jeff Prokop, the district's chief information officer, said school officials can run a report and see how many students are enrolled and when they last interacted with the learning platforms. From there, they can infer percentages of student connectivity in a given date range.

Prokop said that about 97% of students in kindergarten through 12th grade connected with the district since it reopened Sept. 8, and weekly reports show similar results. "That is remarkably better than what we were experiencing in the spring, when everything happened so quickly," he said. "What was close to 1,000 students that were not connecting in the spring is down to 238."

Sondra Sanford, partnership coordinator for New Britain schools, said family-school liaisons are continuing to search for those disconnected or "remote, never checked in" students in the district. "That's our focus now," she said. "Then, we'll dive in deeper to the full-time engagement throughout the day."

New Britain Superintendent of Schools Nancy Sarra said teachers also have access to Securly, a computer application that allows them to track what students are working on, as well as see if a child is struggling to complete an assignment.

Sarra said the district intends to stay in a hybrid model for the foreseeable future. If schools do have to close later in the fall because of a resurgence in cases, the administrators said they did not think the number of disconnected students in New Britain would increase as students and educators are better equipped to handle remote learning than they were in the fall.

"In the event it goes to a full-blown disruption, the teachers are better equipped to be able to handle it," Prokop said. "On the back end, the work with getting families connected at home has certainly gone a long way in making sure connectivity continues."

Information from The Connecticut Mirror is included in this report.