LEARNING RENEWAL SERIES:

Exploring Practices for Learning Renewal in Illinois After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Executive Summary

Summary

In April 2023, we conducted a survey of K-12 school districts within the state of Illinois to understand the efforts they undertook to contain and recover from pandemic-related learning disturbances. In partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), we collected more than 200 responses from 81 districts throughout the state. This yielded a healthy geographic sample of districts, as well as a glance at the diverse practices implemented for learning renewal in Illinois. This report—part of the Learning Renewal series—describes the responses we obtained from districts about the implementation of learning renewal practices as a post-pandemic response. These practices included hiring additional staff, promoting staff and educators' professional development, implementing social-emotional learning curricula, and advancing the use of technology in schools, among others. In addition to specific practices being implemented, we also collected information on the resources used to promote learning renewal, the likelihood of new policies/practices remaining long-term, and the sources of information used to develop learning renewal strategies. Combining our unique data with information in the Illinois Report Card, we were also able to study differences and similarities between districts with different characteristics.

Key Findings

- **Districts hired support and instructional staff to aid learning recovery.** Over half of districts in our survey reported hiring more social support staff. Over a third reported hiring teachers and other part-time staff. The types of staff hired varied according to district size, as small districts were more likely to hire paraprofessionals than medium or large districts. Large districts, on the other hand, were more likely to hire instructional coaches, librarians, and nurses.

- **Districts engaged in recovery interventions that extended academic time**. Specifically, most district survey participants reported interventions for learning recovery as being summer learning programs and extended day programs, as well as initiatives concerned with enrollment and attendance. Large districts were significantly more likely to report implementing family communication initiatives. Despite the emphasis of high impact tutoring in the literature and calls for investment from researchers, the implementation of these programs amongst our respondents was moderate (about a quarter of respondents).

- **Districts emphasized the implementation of social-emotional learning curriculum changes to promote recovery**. The top reported curricula changes for district respondents included upgrading technology, implementing SEL learning materials, and focusing on specific classroom instruction strategies.

- **Districts also changed their technology**. Over half of districts in our survey reported going one-to-one with tech, expanding laptop/computer use, and broadband upgrades.

- **Districts promoted professional development aligned to these curricular and technology changes.** A majority of districts that responded to the survey reported professional development efforts for learning renewal focused on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and technology.

- **Districts rooted strategies in data.** The majority of districts in our survey used ISBE data and internal research to inform their learning renewal efforts.

Exploring Practices for Learning Renewal in Illinois After the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was associated with steep declines in various educational outcomes (Cashdollar et al. 2022; Gee, Asmundson, and Vang 2023; Easterbrook et al. 2023). To address these consequences, schools and districts implemented a series of strategies to foster student learning in the years following the pandemic. The U.S. government also designated specific funds to be invested in learning recovery: The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund was established to "prevent, prepare for, and respond to the coronavirus impacts on our nation's students" (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, 2020). The fund consisted of $189.5 billion awarded to educational agencies across the nation; Illinois was awarded $7.9 billion.

This unprecedented educational disruption, along with the resources made available to promote learning after the pandemic, created a clear necessity to understand the ways and mechanisms in which school districts could effectively confront and improve student conditions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—both to promote further learning renewal and to inform effective, evidence-based resource use in the future. In partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) undertook a broad project with numerous data sources to understand learning renewal in Illinois. One piece of this work was a survey of school and district personnel that inquired into the strategies implemented to promote students' post-pandemic development in Illinois; this survey was designed to triangulate and support a deeper analysis of what districts with the most successful recovery patterns did to promote such recovery.

In this report—second in the Learning Renewal series—we detail the responses from the survey of learning renewal practices. These practices included hiring additional staff, promoting staff and educators' professional development, implementing social-emotional learning curricula, and advancing the use of technology in schools, among others. In addition to specific implemented practices, we also report information on the resources used to promote learning renewal and the likelihood of some of these policies remaining long-term as part of schools' and districts' educational plans. Finally, we combine IWERC's survey data with Illinois Report Card data to analyze patterns of learning renewal strategies across different types of districts, including by size, geographic location, and urbanicity, among other characteristics.

In the next section, we briefly summarize the relevant literature about general trends of recovery in the United States and Illinois as well as specific evidence of key strategies implemented across the nation. These strategies include personnel professional development and hiring, changes in curricula and other initiatives, and programs such as extending learning, high-impact tutoring, and attendance policies.

Literature Review

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have offered evidence of modest, yet discernable, recovery of learning lost due to pandemic disruptions (Fahle et al., 2024; Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Here, we focus on the various strategies implemented by educational institutions to combat learning loss and support learning recovery that have been recommended and studied in the literature.

A lot of the discourse surrounding the pandemic has been around **staffing**. Researchers have argued that the pandemic could have exacerbated the already existing educator shortages present across the nation (Bacher-Hicks, Chi, and Orellana 2023). For this reason, scholars have argued for an increase in the hiring of more teachers, especially teachers of color (Dusseault, Pitts, and Lake 2021) as well as other paraprofessional personnel and support staff that help improve educational outcomes (Beilstein and Withee 2021). Similarly, it is vital to provide high-quality professional development and prioritize the solicitation of teacher needs, shifting from top-down decision making (Ding et al. 2022). The context of the pandemic has also highlighted the need to hire health professionals, including both nurses and mental health professionals (e.g., psychologists and counselors) (Department of Education 2022; Alexander et al. 2022).

Relatedly, **social-emotional learning** (SEL) has also been emphasized, with specific calls for targeted social-emotional learning in the classroom (Dusseault, Pitts, and Lake 2021; Schwartz et al. 2021; Desmond, Sherr, and Cluver 2021). The implementation of SEL strategies is relevant for promoting student development overall, but became particularly relevant in the context of the pandemic as it can provide strategies for coping with stressful situations caused by COVID-19 (Zieher et al. 2021; Hamilton and Gross 2021). In Illinois—like in other states—letters were disseminated and surveys were conducted to inform educators about the role of SEL and to encourage the implementation of SEL strategies in the classroom (Yoder et al. 2020).

Intensive tutoring has also been widely cited in the literature, with recommendations to hire one-on-one tutors, potentially via partnerships with universities, to carry out intensive, high-dosage tutoring (Dusseault, Pitts, and Lake 2021). Robinson et al. (2021) formulated a series of principles dedicated to making this strategy effective for advancing student learning and promoting recovery after the pandemic. These recommendations include adequate frequency, individually targeted, well-trained tutors, and fostering tutor-student relationships, among others. Moreover, researchers have found a strong link between high-impact tutoring and increases in academic learning (Guryan et al. 2023; Robinson and Loeb 2021; Fryer and Howard-Noveck 2020).

Extending learning time has also been recommended, with various implementations: summer programs (Callen et al. 2023), extending the school day by one hour (Pan and Sass 2020), or extending the school year and instruction time (Dusseault, Pitts, and Lake 2021). Evidence suggests that a one-hour extension of the school year could reduce learning loss by up to one-third (Pan and Sass 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **attendance and enrollmen**t trends throughout the nation saw a challenge with a considerable decrease in enrollment in traditional school districts (Dee and Murphy 2021; Chatterji and Li 2021), as well as declines in attendance rates (Dee 2023). Thus, implementing strategies that improve attendance and enrollment rates are vital. Some of these recommended strategies include the implementation of early-warning indicators and outreach strategies alongside parental involvement (Rogers et al. 2017; Faria et al., 2017).

Finally, Biasi, Lafortune, and Schönholzer (2024) recently showed that investments to infrastructure such as HVAC and other capital outlays are able to increase test scores of students across districts in the United States. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, leveraging results from monitoring students, viewpoints of teachers, and other relevant sources of data will be vital to promote

student development for academic progress as well as social-emotional wellness, especially after the exacerbated disturbances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overview of the Survey

In April of 2023, IWERC launched a survey of Learning Renewal as part of a two-year study of learning post-COVID in Illinois, wherein we sought to understand the strategies implemented by schools and districts to support learning renewal for students across the state. The survey was conducted in partnership with ISBE. ISBE, along with professional organizations like the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools and the Illinois Principals Association, supported survey dissemination.

The survey was comprised of several sections: (1) general learning renewal strategies; (2) use of data, research, and assessments to inform learning renewal practices; (3) implementation of learning renewal strategies; and (4) resources for learning renewal. Depending on districts' learning renewal plans, the number of items ranged from 20 to 25 questions. Respondents gave their school/district name, with the understanding that it would be used publicly in reports. Data collection began on April 10, 2023, via the Qualtrics survey software provided by the University of Illinois. An anonymous link for sharing was distributed to all partnering state agencies, including ISBE. The link was shared widely via social media, direct email, newsletters, and so forth. Prior to dissemination, IWERC obtained IRB approval from the University of Illinois IRB system. Informed consent was obtained for all participants. The survey closed on May 10, 2023. All schools and districts in Illinois were invited to participate in the survey, but participation was voluntary. We offered a workshop to provide districts with the capacity to evaluate their own learning renewal practices.

Instrument Development

The purpose of the survey was to characterize school and district practices. Questions were developed after conducting research reviews and conversations with stakeholders about important resources for recovery. Specifically, the information we collected from schools and districts concerned the following questions:

a) How do schools/districts characterize their general learning renewal activities?
b) How are schools/districts using data and/or research to plan learning renewal activities?
c) How are schools/districts specifically implementing learning renewal activities (e.g., high-impact tutoring, intervention vs. acceleration approaches, etc.)?
d) How are schools/districts using their ESSER and EBF funding to implement learning renewal?
e) What is the buy-in from teachers, parents, and students into learning renewal activities?
f) What does the investment in district-specific versus statewide learning renewal activities look like?
g) How did schools' and districts' general frameworks/policies/practices around academics, SEL, and technology change during the pandemic? How are those changes

being sustained in the "post-pandemic" period? (And which previous policies and practices did they "double down" on during the pandemic?)

Sample

After the survey was disseminated to administrators of schools and districts in Illinois, we received a total of 229 usable responses, of which 112 (49%) were complete. Thus, the survey was analyzed at the item-level (Parent 2013). A total of 95 district staff members responded to the survey with staff from 81 unique districts participating in our sample. Our initial target was 85 districts to accomplish a 10% sample of districts in Illinois. While we obtained geographically and demographically diverse respondents, as shown in Figure 1, our sample was not an exact representation of the state of Illinois. However, its proximity to representativeness allows us to make comparisons across groups. Respondent districts were located throughout the entire state; 36 (44%) of the participating districts were located in rural areas.

Figure 1. *Map of participating districts.*

Esri, USGS | Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, EPA, NPS
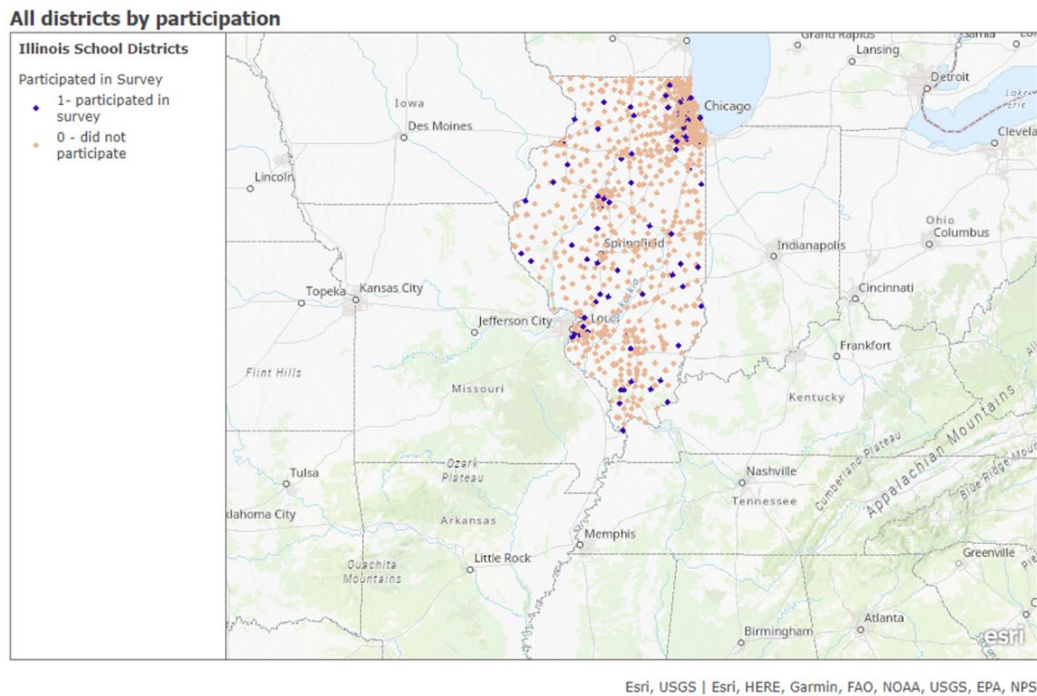
We used data from the SY23 Illinois Report Card to determine district size (large, medium, or small). As such, 27 (33%) respondents were from large districts, 37 (46%) from medium sized districts, and 17 (21%) from small districts. Additionally, districts were sorted by urbanicity according to the classification of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023). Of the respondents, 45 represented urban districts and 36 represented rural districts. The majority of respondents identified themselves as school principals, superintendents, and associate superintendents, suggesting they had the knowledge of what practices and policies were being implemented district-wide regarding learning recovery.

Table 1. *Survey respondent demographics.*

Variable	N	% in survey	% in state[*]
District size			
Large	27	33	25
Medium	37	46	50
Small	17	21	25
Urbanicity			
Urban	45	56	54
Rural	36	44	46
Reporting respondent			
School principal	29	36	
District superintendent	29	36	
Associate district superintendent	11	14	n/a
District staff	6	7	
Other	4	5	
School teacher	2	2	

*According to SY22 Report card data

Analytic Approach

While our sample was not an exact representation of Illinois, its closeness to state numbers allowed us to gather important information from districts to achieve our primary goal of understanding the practices being implemented for learning renewal and compare them across districts with different characteristics. As aforementioned, survey responses were analyzed at the item-level (Parent 2013). To analyze statistically significant differences in strategies across districts with different characteristics, we conducted chi-square tests of means using the Bonferroni correction (Korn and Graubard 1990).

Moreover, to garner the most accurate information about districts' implementation of learning renewal practices, all survey sections included the possibility of adding information if an implemented option was not offered. We analyzed these responses separately and coded them according to the information provided in text. While most responses had a very small sample (less than 3%), one open-ended question warranted a detailed qualitative analysis (*The pandemic affected mode of instruction (e.g.: remote, hybrid or person) for all districts/schools. Beyond mode of instruction, did any of your practices (including routines, curricula, SEL, and/or technology) change because of the pandemic? If so, please share how*). We used a thematic approach (Braun et al, 2018) to qualitatively identify patterns in the responses. We identified thematic clusters within these codes, and classified responses accordingly. Two raters discussed both semantic codes and emergent categories at several stages to find consensus on the 63 obtained responses.

Findings: Strategies Implemented for Learning Renewal in Illinois

Staffing

When asked "*What changes in staffing has your school/district made for learning renewal?*," the most commonly reported change was hiring more social support staff (55% of districts), followed by

hiring more teachers (39%) and part-time staff for learning renewal activities (34%). Sixteen percent of respondents indicated no changes to staffing made for learning renewal, while 15% reported hiring more librarians, nurses, or other support staff (not teachers or counselors). Other staffing changes were described by respondents as hiring more aids and teaching assistants for specific subjects, including reading and math.

Figure 2. *Changes in staffing implemented for learning renewal.*
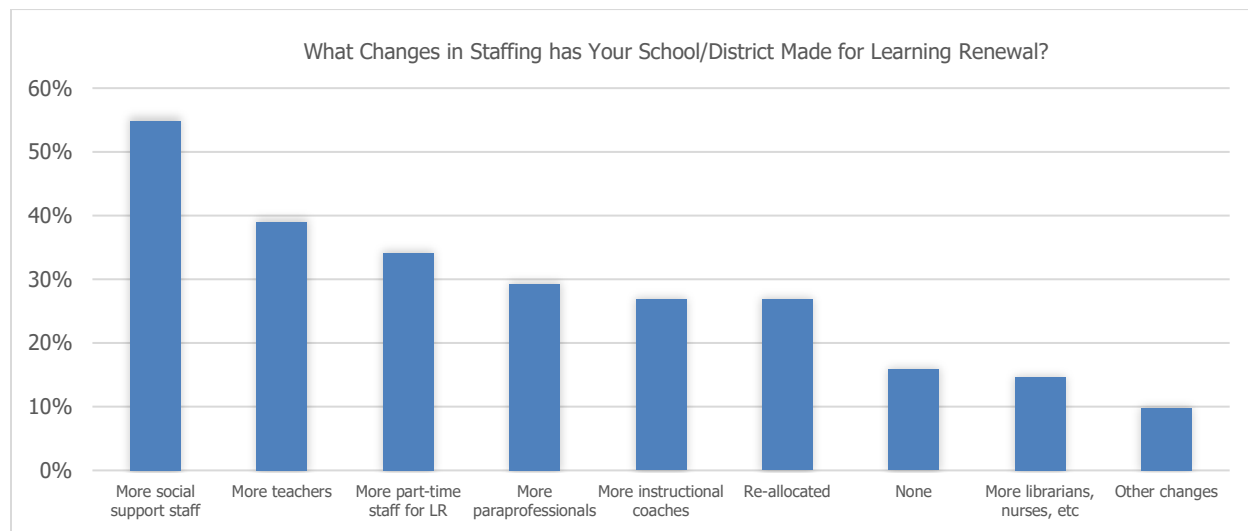
We found significant differences in reported paraprofessional hiring by district size (χ^2(2, N = 81) = 9.05, p = .0.011). As shown in Figure 3, small districts were significantly more likely to report hiring more paraprofessionals for learning renewal, whereas large districts were more likely to hire instructional coaches and nurses or librarians. These differences could point to differences in needs across different types of districts, a difference in preference on what personnel to hire, or a difference in the availability of personnel to hire across certain districts. One of our survey participants added that they hired: "*Additional support for elementary as we were not able to hire additional teachers due to a lack of qualified candidates*".

Figure 3. *Changes in staffing implemented for learning renewal by district size.*

What Changes in Staffing has Your School/District Made for Learning Renewal? By District Size
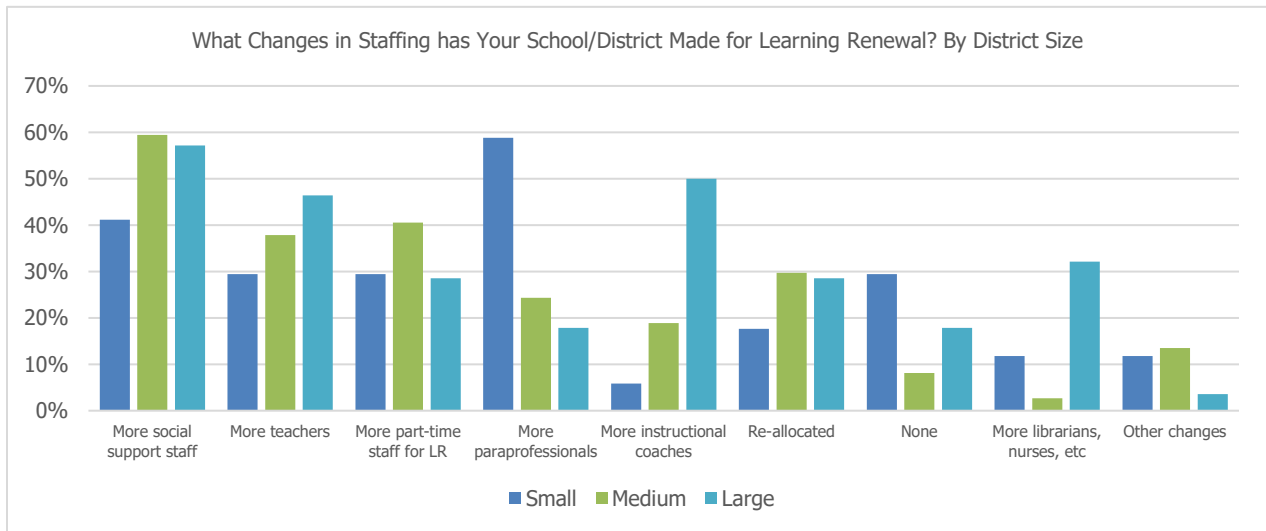
Professional Development

When asked "*What professional development strategies has your school/district implemented for learning renewal?*" most respondents reported implementing social-emotional training (74%) and technology training (63%). Notably, approximately one-fifth of respondents (21%) reported implementing training on learning recovery in particular. Only 4% of respondents reported making no changes (see Figure 4). Qualitative data analysis of "other changes" responses pointed to specific programs or curricula implemented by districts mostly corresponding to online learning and training for new teachers. There were no statistically significant differences found between changes in professional development reported and district size or urbanicity. This suggests all districts equally prioritized professional development of their personnel, especially related to SEL.

Figure 4. *Changes in professional development implemented for learning renewal.*

What Professional Development Strategies has Your School/District Implemented for Learning Renewal?
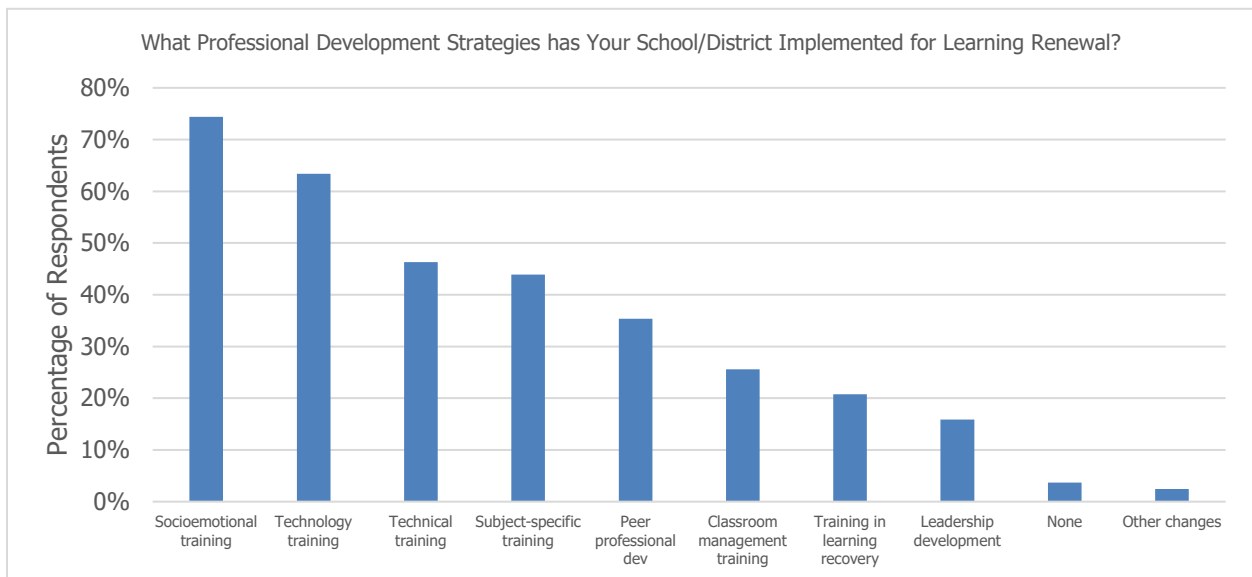
Curriculum and Instruction

When asked "*What curriculum or instructional strategies has your school/district implemented for learning renewal?,*" the majority of respondents indicated upgrading technology (61%), implementing social-emotional learning materials (60%), and focusing on specific classroom instruction strategies (53%). Half of respondents reported upgrading instructional materials (50%). Only 4% of respondents reported making no changes to curriculum and instruction, while 2% of respondents reported "other" changes such as informal assessments of instruction. Curricula strategies implemented by districts are summarized in Figure 5. No statistically significant differences in curriculum and instruction strategies reported were found between district size or urbanicity. Again, it seems that districts equally prioritized upgrades in technology as well as the implementation of SEL curricula throughout Illinois. Moreover, these findings aligned with those from the professional development foci across districts. As stated by one of the survey respondents: "*Technology enhancements have extended well beyond pandemic use and has become a major factor in our current educational delivery method for all students, but specifically those whom struggle academically.*"

Figure 5. *Curriculum or instructional strategies implemented for learning renewal.*
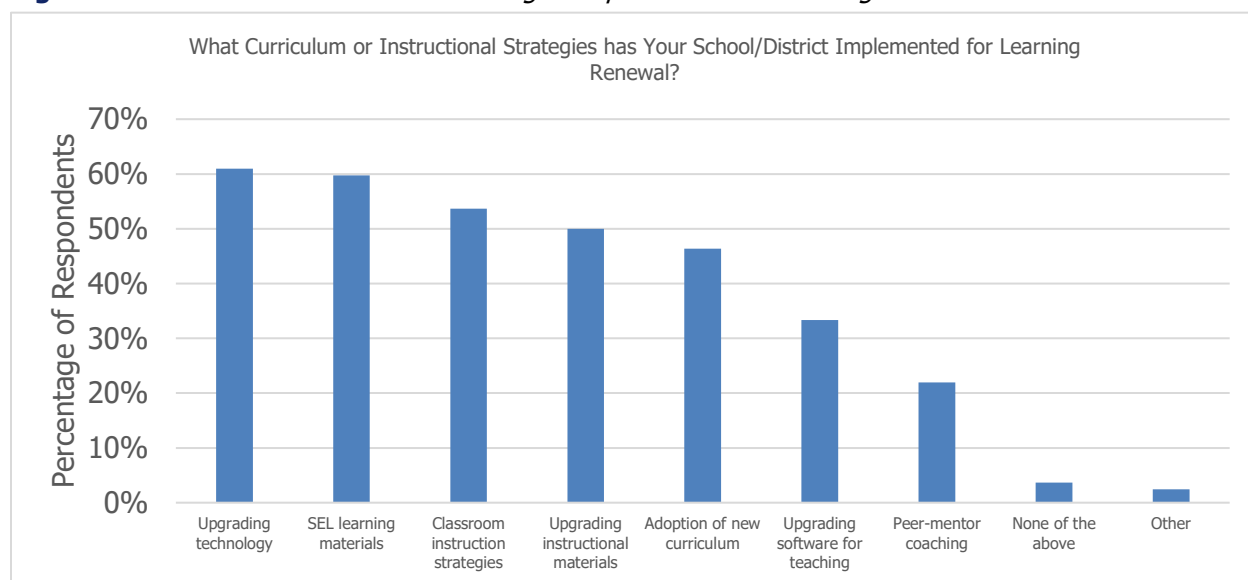
Interventions and Outreach

When asked "*What interventions and outreach strategies has your school/district implemented or altered?*", most respondents reported summer learning programs (73%) and after school or extended day learning (60%), while more than half indicated enrollment and attendance initiatives (54%). Only 4% of respondents indicated making no changes as shown in Figure 6. We also highlight that high-impact tutoring was only implemented by 23% of respondents in our sample, despite the strong evidence for its potential role in learning recovery (Robinson et al. 2021). While we collected data in SY23, and the implementation of these programs could have increased, fostering the implementation of these kinds of initiatives could pose an area of opportunity to promote accelerated student recovery.

Figure 6. *Interventions and outreach strategies implemented or altered.*

What Interventions and Outreach Strategies has Your School/District Implemented or Altered?

(Bar chart showing percentages for: Summer learning programs ~73%, After school or extended day learning ~60%, Efforts to improve attendance and/or enrollment ~54%, Family communication initiatives ~40%, High-impact tutoring ~23%, Wraparound services ~21%, None of the above ~4%, Other ~1%)
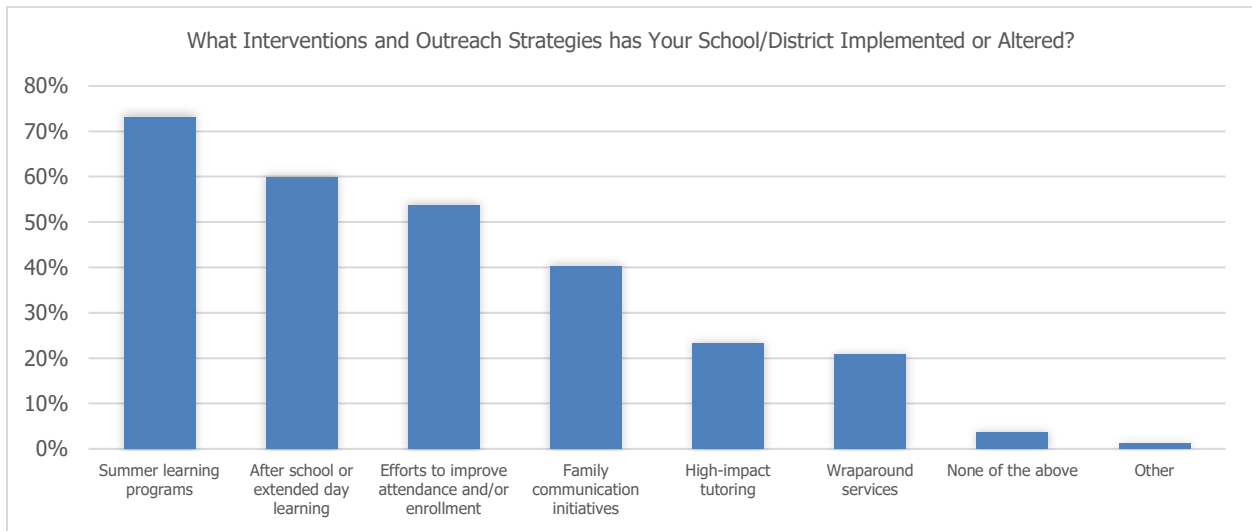
In addition, we found some significant differences in reported implementation of family communication initiatives by district size ($\chi2(2, N = 80) = 9.51$, $p = .008$). Specifically, large districts were significantly more likely to report implementing or altering family communication initiatives (51%) compared to small (41%) and medium-sized (32%) districts as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. *Interventions and outreach strategies implemented or altered by district size.*

What Interventions and Outreach Strategies has Your School/District Implemented or Altered? By District Size

(Grouped bar chart by district size — Small, Medium, Large — for categories: Summer learning programs (Small ~71%, Medium ~71%, Large ~70%), After school or extended day learning (Small ~76%, Medium ~56%, Large ~62%), Efforts to improve attendance and/or enrollment (Small ~35%, Medium ~49%, Large ~73%), Family communication initiatives (Small ~41%, Medium ~32%, Large ~51%), High-impact tutoring (Small ~24%, Medium ~12%, Large ~35%), Wraparound services (Medium ~24%, Large ~30%), None of the above (Small ~6%, Medium ~5%), Other (Large ~3%))

■Small ■Medium ■Large

Technology Updates and Upgrades

When asked "*How did your school/district update or upgrade technology for learning renewal?*" over half of respondents reported going one-to-one with technology (53%), expanding laptop/computer use (57%), and broadband updates (52%) as described in Figure 8. Compared to previous questions, more respondents reported making no changes to technology for learning renewal (12%), adding that

"*Prior to COVID we had a robust technology infrastructure allowing us to pivot quickly when the Stay at Home order was put into* place[…]". The 2% of respondents indicating that they made other changes not listed described those changes as monitoring of online behavior at home and including digital assessment options.

Figure 8. *Technology updates or upgrades for learning renewal.*
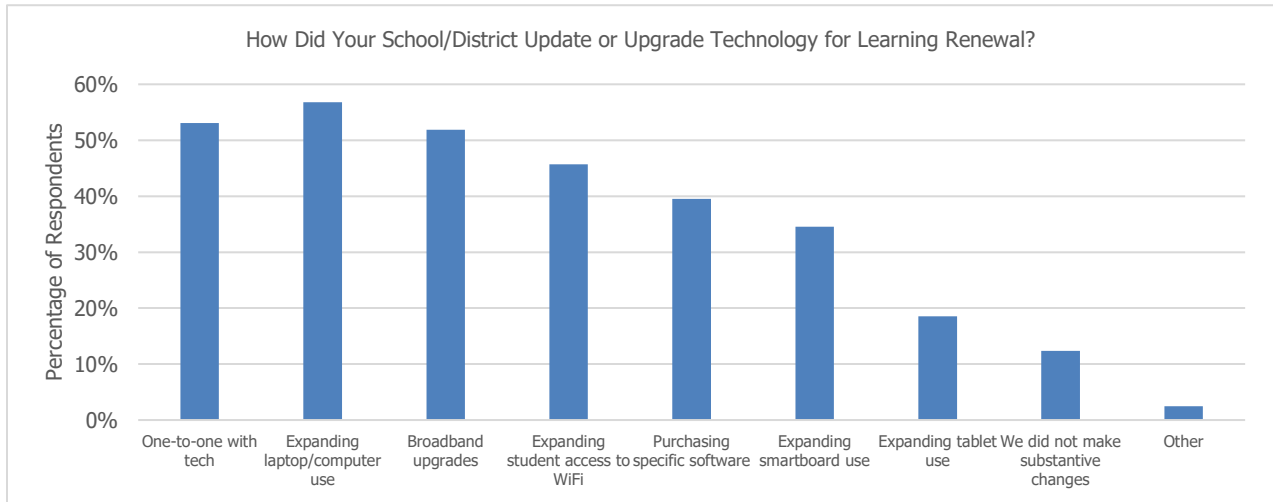
As before, we found significant differences in terms of district characteristics. Specifically, as shown in Figure 9, rural districts were significantly more likely to report going one-to-one with technology (69%) compared to urban (39%) districts, as shown in Figure 9 ($\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 5.83, p = .016$). The pandemic-related funding perhaps opened the possibility for rural districts to level their technology to that of their urban counterparts. One district leader stated: "*Technology, and our 1:1 program, has definitely changed. We went from utilizing computer labs and the resultant scheduling woes to now students have a Chromebook available to take home. This has allowed teachers to extend what is taught in class.*"

Figure 9. *Technology updates or upgrades for learning renewal by urbanicity.*

How Did Your School/District Update or Upgrade Technology or Learning Renewal?
By Urbanicity
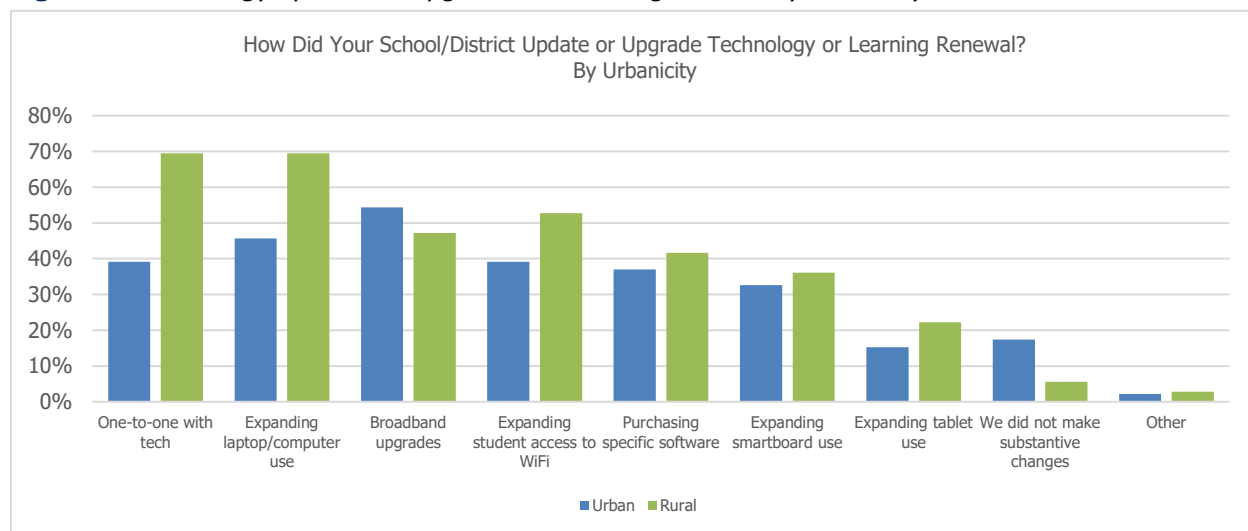
Other Strategies and Practices Implemented for Learning Renewal

We also offered districts the option to share additional changes implemented to promote student development during and after the pandemic emergency, and 63 districts did so. Our qualitative coding indicated that the three main categories of "other" changes included (a) technological integration and innovation; (b) Social and Emotional learning emphasis; and (c) changes in scheduling and school routines. A secondary theme (less prevalent in districts' responses) included changes in an educational approach and mindset, as a district superintendent posed: "*Covid years were some of our best years in our school in the past 10 years. It's all about your approach and mindset.*"

Technological integration and innovation encompassed a heightened use of technology in education, including the inclusion of software or hardware such as Google Classroom, Chromebooks, and other online platforms. Quotes that exemplify this category are listed below:

> "When students were remote, the daily schedule changed to accommodate the fact that students were in a remote environment. Routines had to be retaught and continue to be retaught since students returned to school because social and acceptable norms were forgotten. […] The move to the 1:1 environment was accelerated in our District and we were able to move 25,000 students to this environment in a very short period of time. Now, we are setting the goals, expectations, and parameters of device use in our schools. The focus has shifted from how do [we] grow a 1:1 environment to how do we effectively sustain and maintain a 1:1 environment, what does the research say about appropriate computer usage across K-12 and how do we embed it as a tool in a learning environment."

However, other districts stated an intentional distancing from the use of technology such as:

> "We actually have tried to move AWAY from tech-based instruction/curriculum to make up the time lost on in person learning. We also focus on making sure our students are happy more, and that has worked.

The category of the implementation of an SEL curriculum was defined by many respondents that mentioned an increased focus on SEL, the hiring of social workers, or implementing an SEL curriculum with a specific increased focus on student mental health and well-being as illustrated by the following quotes:

> "SEL instruction shifted from social worker lead pre-pandemic to classroom teacher lead upon return. This helps us lead to a more universal ownership, common language and implementation."

> "We implemented CloseGap & maintained weekly whole group counseling for SEL. We continued to make programs available via technology to enhance small group and individual practice."

Changes in scheduling and school routines were seen across district responses in many ways, including different school hours, changes in attendance expectations, staggered dismissals, and/or changes in passing period times, as exemplified by the following:

> "Increased common planning for staff, structured morning meeting time everyday for all classrooms, 30-minute recess for all students" and "Some routines changed permanently such as drop-off and pick-up practices, student arrival, etc."

Finally, changes in educational approaches or mindset included changes in educational approach (remote, hybrid learning, 1:1), addressing cultural equity, changes in teachers' mindset, and the perceived positive/negative effects of these changes as summarized by:

> "As a district we changed the way we assessed student learning. Teachers developed alternative methods of [assessing] student learning."

Permanency of Changes

When asked "*Do you intend on making any of these changes permanent,*" 35% of respondents indicated "Definitely yes," closely followed by 33% of respondents indicating "probably yes" as depicted in Figure 10.

Figure 10. *Likelihood of permanence of changes that occurred during the pandemic.*
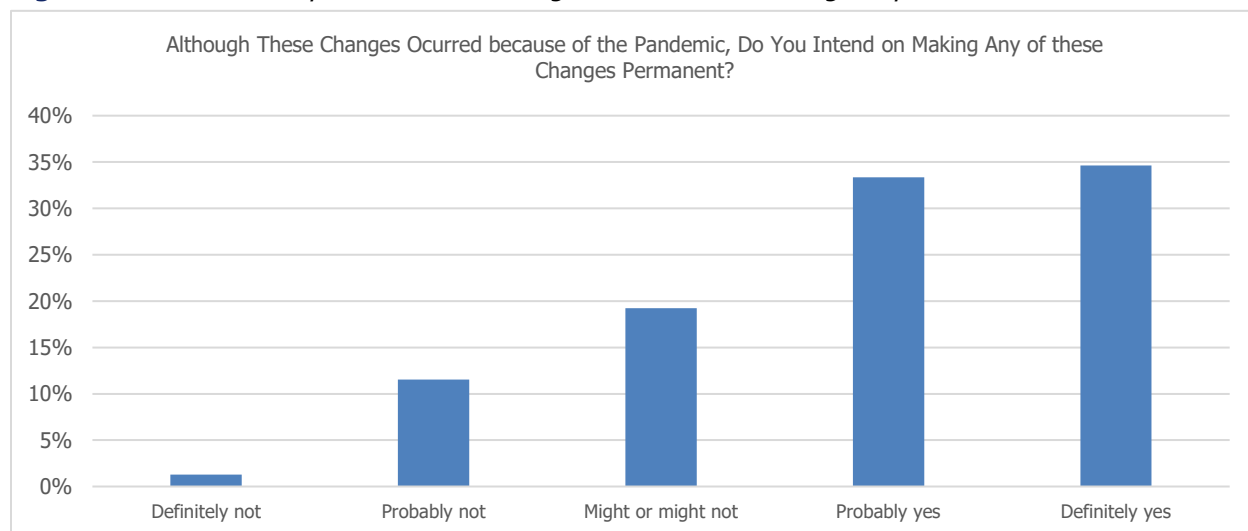
Implementation of Learning Renewal Strategies

Sources of Funding

Overall, most respondents reported using local funds for (1) staffing, (2) curriculum and instruction, and (3) data, assessment, and research. ESSER funds were most frequently reported to be used for (1) professional development, (2) interventions and outreach, and (3) technology upgrades. We did not find significant differences across districts characteristics for the staffing, curriculum, technology upgrades, or data and assessment strategies.

Table 2 shows the proportion of funds used for each type of practice related to renewal. Here, we note that ESSER funds were mostly used for interventions and outreach as well as technology upgrades. Alternatively, staffing, curricula changes and data use and research were funded using mostly local funds. This finding points to more flexibility in changes that will not necessarily expire with the cease of ESSER funds. However, from an equity standpoint we know that there are large differences in the ability to garner local resources across districts and differences in local funds could exacerbate differences in expenditures, especially because EBF funds only contribute to all of these strategies across the board to a little extent.

As summarized in Table 2, for staffing, we uncovered that most respondents (71%) reported using local funds, followed by ESSER funds (59%) and EBF funds (43%)[1], but for professional development most respondents (59%) reported using ESSER funds, followed by local funds (53%) and EBF funds (37%). Funding for curriculum and instruction mostly came from local funds (71%), followed by ESSER (53%) and EBF (45%). When asked about funding usage for technology upgrades, most respondents (73%) reported using ESSER funds, followed by local funds (55%) and EBF (31%).

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[1] EBF funds are those distributed by ISBE according to students' needs. See more: https://www.isbe.net/Pages/EvidenceBasedFunding.aspx

Table 2. *Distribution of resources across learning renewal strategies.*

	ESSER funds	EBF funds	Local funds	Other funds	I don't know
Staffing	59%	43%	71%	16%	11%
Professional development	59%	37%	53%	37%	10%
Curriculum and instruction	53%	45%	71%	21%	10%
Interventions and outreach	58%	33%	52%	28%	11%
Technology upgrades	73%	31%	55%	24%	9%
Data, assessment and research	28%	30%	57%	22%	16%

When asked which source of funding their school/district uses for interventions and outreach, most respondents (58%) indicated ESSER funds, followed by local (52%), and EBF (33%) as shown in Figure 11. Significant differences were found across district urbanicity as urban districts were significantly more likely to report using local funds for interventions and outreach: $\chi^2(1, N = 79) = 6.55$, $p < .010$.

Figure 11. *Sources of funding for intervention and outreach by urbanicity.*
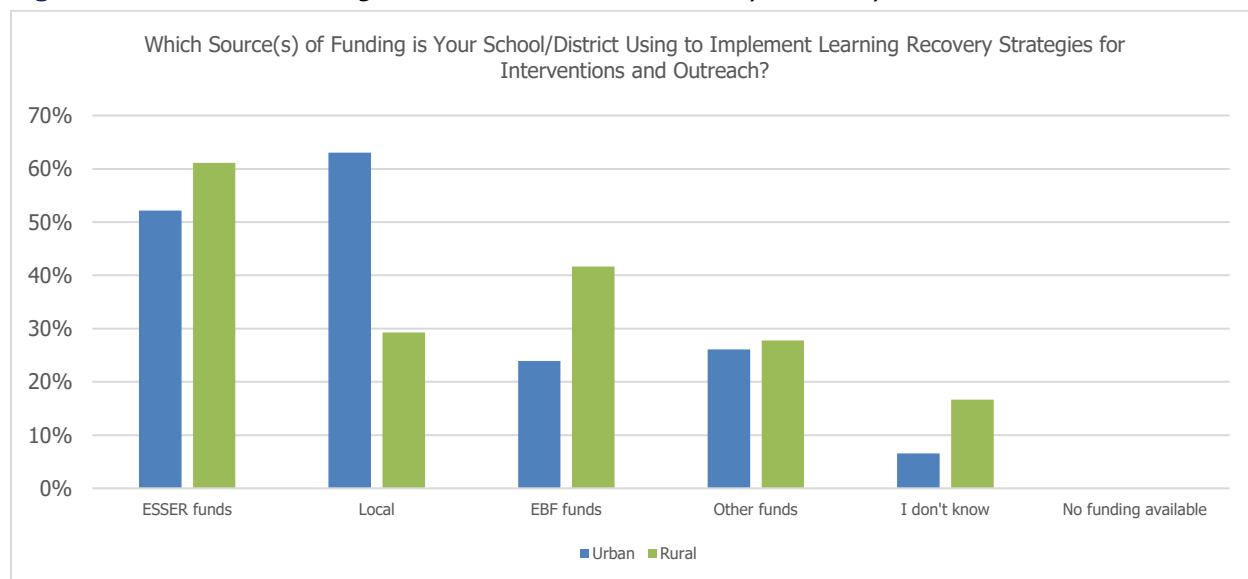
Support from Stakeholders

In implementing any school improvement strategy, buy-in from relevant stakeholders is critical. Using a 4-point Likert-type scale, where 4 points indicate "A lot" of support and 1 indicates support "Not at all" received, respondents reportedly perceived the most buy-in for learning renewal strategies from superintendents ($M = 2.66$), followed by district staff ($M = 2.49$) and teachers and school staff ($M = 2.41$) (see Figure 12). No significant difference testing could be done due to insufficient group sizes.

**Figure 12.** *Support and buy-in for learning renewal strategies.*
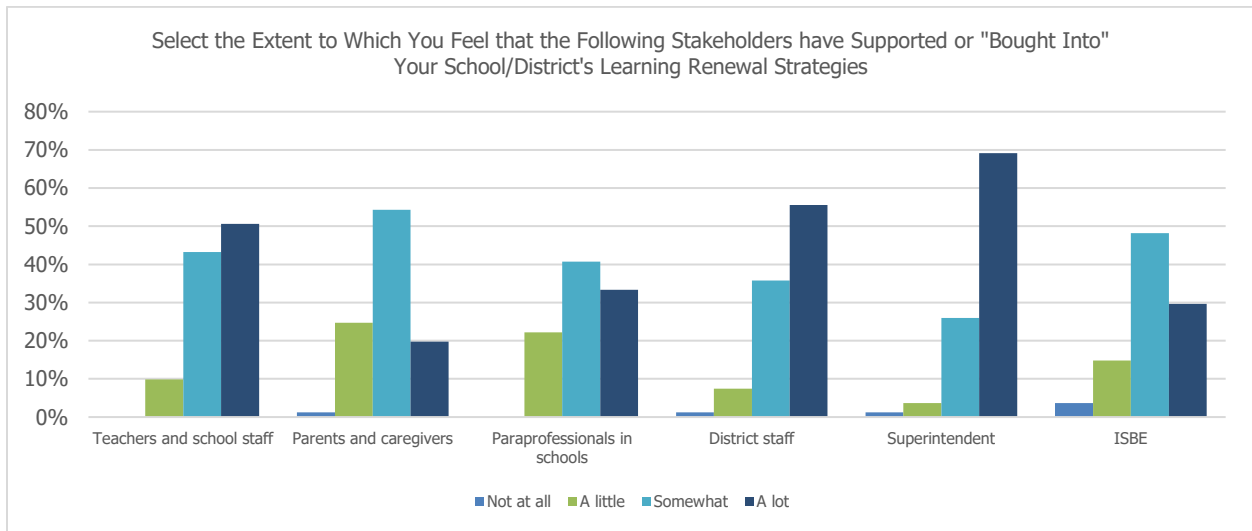
Informing Research Renewal Strategies

Use of Data, Research, and Assessment

When respondents were asked, "*Which of the following data/research/assessment sources is your school/district using to inform, design, and plan for learning recovery strategies,*" most respondents (79%) reported using ISBE data, followed by internal research (65%) and interim assessments (38%) (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. *Use of data/research/assessment to inform, design, and plan learning recovery.*
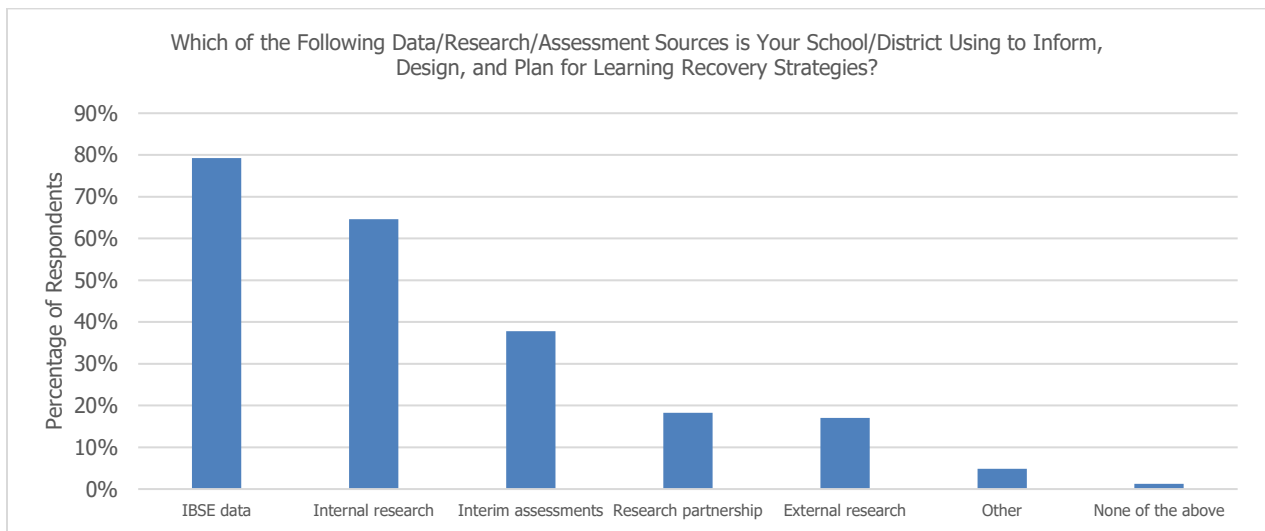
Additionally, most respondents indicated that they **always** use data to evaluate student learning (62%). However, most respondents reported **sometimes** using data to (1) inform teaching (52%), (2) modify class plans (62%), and (3) inform teaching and lesson plans (68%), as shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14. *Research and data use specifics to inform recovery.*

Respondent's Research and Data Use

Legend: ■ Always ■ Sometimes ■ Never
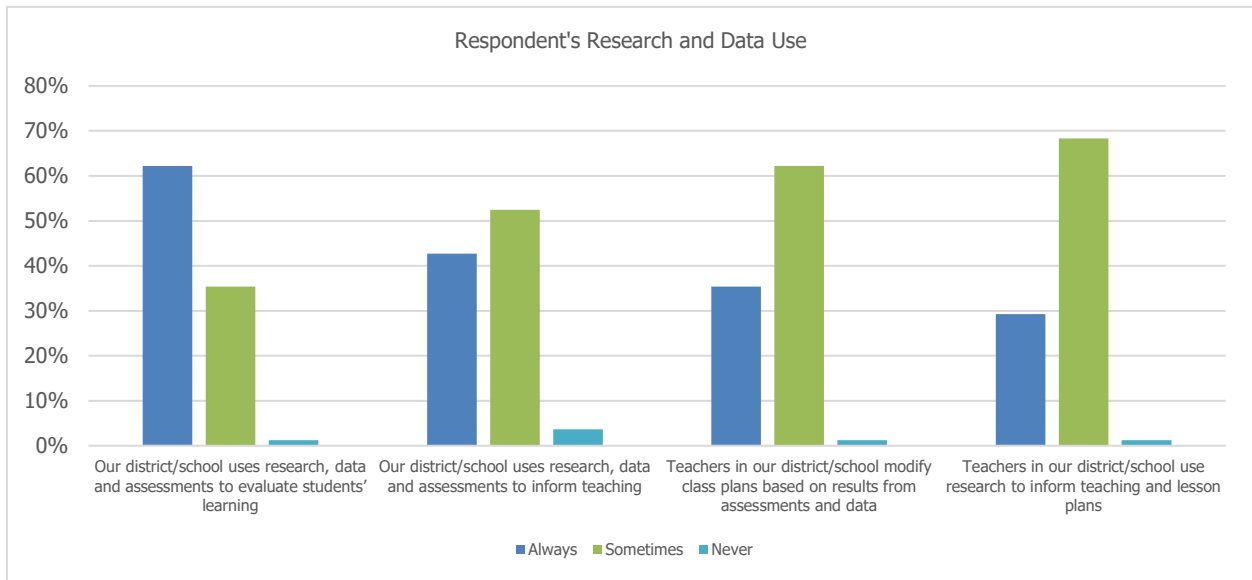
Resources for Learning Renewal Provided by ISBE

Finally, as depicted in Figure 15, when asked about **use of resources provided by ISBE,** the most commonly reported resource used was principal mentoring (35% of respondents), followed by SEL hubs (30%) and teacher mentoring (30%). Unlike the rest of the implemented strategies, we observed an important variation in the resources provided by ISBE that districts were using, suggesting more diverse needs in districts to promote student development, including student learning and social-emotional support. Here, we also want to note that not all programs were open/eligible for all districts. For example, Community Partnerships, ITI, and Jump Start were open to districts disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and/or districts with greater need as determined by the state agency.

Figure 15. *Use of ISBE resources for learning recovery.*

Is Your School or District Using Any of The Following Resources Provided by ISBE?
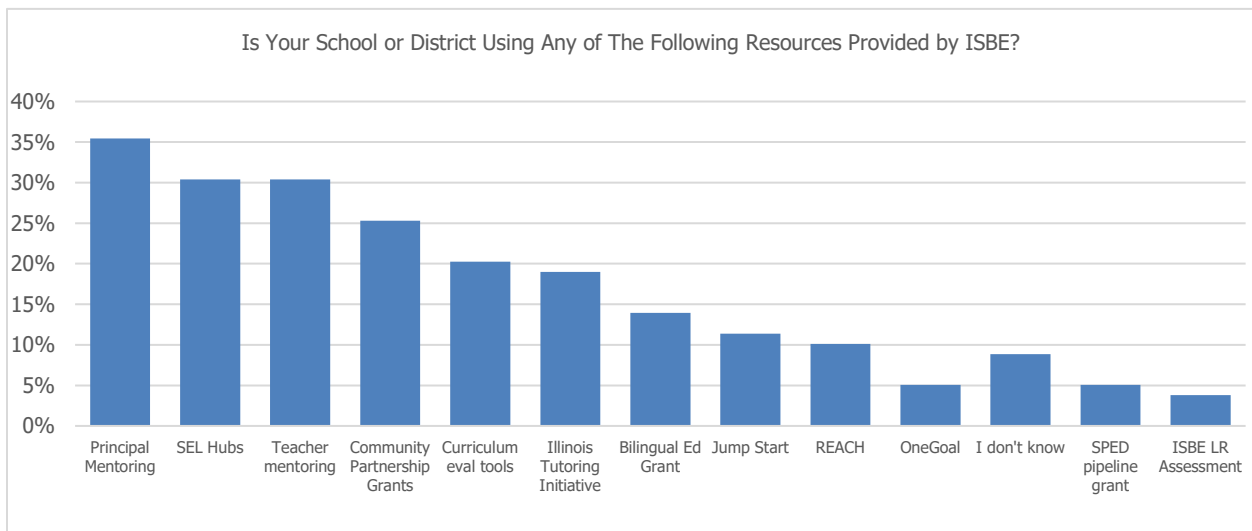
Need for Additional Resources

When asked, "*Do you need any more specific resources to implement learning renewal strategies and policies?"* a large proportion of respondents indicated "No" (49%), with 36% responding "Maybe" and 15% responding "Yes." No significant differences were found between district size and urbanicity for this question.

Figure 16. *Need for additional resources for continuing with recovery.*

Do You Need Any More Specific Resources to Implement Learning Renewal Strategies and Policies?

Yes 15%
Maybe 36%
No 49%
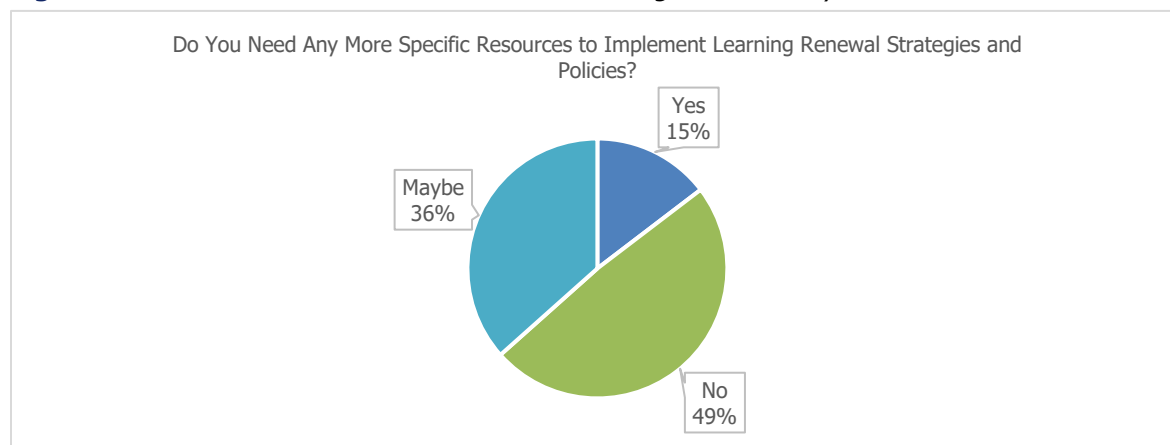
Conclusion and Implications

In this report, we summarized findings from our survey on learning renewal practices conducted across the state of Illinois. Using a diverse geographic sample of 81 districts, we found that most districts in our survey hired more personnel—although not necessarily teachers—and improved their professional development training related to technology, especially in rural districts. Importantly, a large number of districts focused on the implementation of an SEL curriculum in order to promote the social emotional development of students. Finally, we uncovered that districts blended local, ESSER, EBF, and other funds to support learning recovery.

Our findings contribute to conversation about post-pandemic recovery in many ways. First, we distinguish the different kinds of personnel districts hired during the pandemic period, as small districts were more likely to hire paraprofessionals and large districts were more likely to hire instructional coaches, librarians, and nurses. Second, we uncovered that districts implemented a range of interventions that extended learning time as well as involved communication with families, especially in large districts. Next, we highlight that districts emphasized SEL throughout the pandemic period, and most declared that this will remain in place in the long run. Finally, while we recognize that the resources from ESSER will expire in 2024 and districts will incur a *fiscal cliff*, it may look different from what has been discussed so far in the media, as most personnel were hired using a combination of funds. ESSER funds were mostly used for improvements in technology and the implementation of specific interventions. It is likely to be this category of strategies that will see a decrease in funding with the expiration of ESSER.

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