School Preparedness Plans for Pandemics and Continuity of Education

Policy Brief

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F. Chris Curran, *University of Florida*

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F. Chris Curran, PhD
Associate Professor & Co-Director of the UF Education Policy Research Center

The recent and ongoing COVID-19 global health pandemic has drastically altered the learning environment of K-12 students nationwide, resulting in disrupted education for students and rapidly evolving responses by the public education system. While difficult to prepare for a pandemic of this scale, this policy brief demonstrates that about a quarter of school districts and the majority of schools nationwide did not have response plans in place for an infectious disease pandemic prior to COVID-19. Furthermore, the prevalence of these plans had been on the decline for the past decade following a rapid increase between 2008 and 2010. This policy brief also demonstrates that, of potential crises examined in national surveys, response plans for pandemics or infectious diseases were among the least likely to exist compared to other disasters (i.e. natural disasters, school shootings, etc.). Finally, this brief highlights the fact that the majority of schools did not report having plans in place to ensure the continuity of education in the face of a disruption to in-person instruction.

COVID-19 and School Preparedness for Pandemics

The recent COVID-19 global health pandemic has resulted in wide-ranging societal disruptions and necessitated responses from organizations across almost all sectors. Public education has been no exception as almost all schools across the nation have been closed in response to the pandemic. As a result, public schools have been faced with the challenge of providing continuity of education to students while school buildings are physically closed, and, as they look toward the next school year, schools are grappling with the steps necessary to facilitate a return to physical schooling while minimizing the public health risk.

> Prior to COVID-19, the federal Healthy People 2020 initiative contained an objective to increase school district pandemic planning.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was unexpected, the threat and potential challenges associated with a widespread pandemic were not entirely unanticipated. In fact, the need for school preparedness for pandemics was reflected for the past decade in the federal government's Healthy People 2020 objectives which sought to "Increase the percentage of school districts that required schools to include procedures for responding to pandemic flu or other infectious disease outbreaks" (CDC, 2016).

What is more, the possibility of unexpected school closures and the need to provide continued education to students in the midst of a crisis that limits access to physical schooling was also not entirely new. Indeed, students have regularly experienced short-term and localized disruptions to in-person education as a result of weather conditions, natural disasters, and even infectious disease outbreaks.

Yet, as this policy brief highlights, the crisis plans for infectious disease pandemics as well as for continuity of education during disruptions to in-person schooling were not ubiquitous in US public schools prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. What is more, trends show that, in some cases, the prevalence of such plans and other preparedness measures were actually decreasing.

- In 2018, only **46%** of US public schools reported having a written plan describing procedures to be performed during a pandemic disease.
- Between 2010 and 2018, the proportion of US public schools with a written plan for pandemic diseases **decreased by 34%**.
- In 2016, only **43%** of school districts had a crisis plan that included procedures for ensuring the continuity of education during unplanned school closures.

The findings point to the need for ongoing preparation and preparedness planning even when the risk of certain disruptions seems low as well as the need for schools to enhance their capacity to ensure continuity of education in the event of a disruption to in-person education, regardless of the cause.

Crisis and Pandemic Planning

Districts and schools commonly have crisis preparedness plans. According to national data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), however, pandemics were among the least likely of topics to be included in such plans. As shown in Figure 1, as of 2018 (the most recent school year for which SSOCS data are available), only 45.7% of US public schools reported including plans for a pandemic disease in their crisis plans.
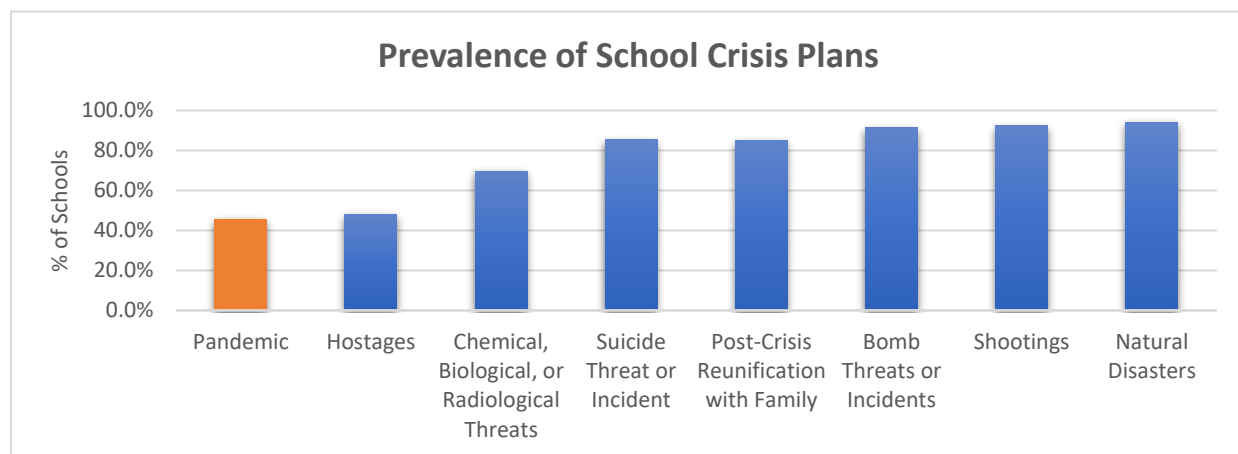

Figure 1. Prevalence of School Crisis Plans

Note. Data from 2017-18 School Survey on Crime and Safety. Reported by school administrator or other school leader responsible for safety planning.

As shown, the prevalence of pandemic diseases in school crisis plans was far less frequent than plans for many other potential crises. Specifically, pandemic plans were only about half as common as plans for bomb threats, shootings, or natural disasters.

While pandemic plans were absent in the majority of school plans, a greater proportion of school districts did report planning for pandemics or infectious disease outbreaks in their district level plans. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s 2016 School Health Policies and Practices Study, 73.6% of school districts reported having "crisis preparedness, response, and recovery plans" that included "procedures for responding to pandemic influenza (flu) or other infectious disease outbreaks" (CDC, 2016). Furthermore, in 2016, 65.3% of school districts reported requiring schools to include pandemics in their school-level plans (CDC, 2016), though the figure actually reported by schools in the SSOCS was noticeably lower.

> While absent in the majority of school plans, 73.6% of school districts reported plans for pandemic disease outbreaks.

Pandemic Planning and Preparedness Were Decreasing Over the Last Decade

Despite the priority placed on school preparedness and plans for pandemic diseases in the federal Healthy People 2020 initiative, the prevalence of school plans and other supports for school response to pandemic diseases actually decreased over the years prior to COVID-19.

As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of schools reporting a pandemic plan decreased by about 34% from the 2009-10 school year (69.4%) to the 2017-18 school year (45.7%). Ironically, this downward trend followed a significant spike in the percentage of schools with pandemic plans between 2007-08 and 2009-10, an increase that was potentially driven in part by the 2009 H1N1 flu outbreak.

Schools with Pandemic Plan

Y-axis: % of Schools (0.0% to 100.0%)
X-axis: 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020

Data points:
- 2008, 36.10%
- 2010, 69.40%
- 2016, 51.00
- 2018, 45.70%

Figure 2. Prevalence of School Pandemic Plans over Time

Note. Data from School Survey on Crime and Safety. Reported by school administrator or other school leader responsible for safety planning. Asked about "pandemic influenza" until 2018 when revised to ask about "pandemic disease".

This decrease in pandemic plans was also observed in metrics compiled by the CDC. Specifically, the percentage of school districts that required schools to include procedures for responding to pandemics or infectious disease outbreaks decreased from 69.0% to 65.3% between 2012 and 2016, a
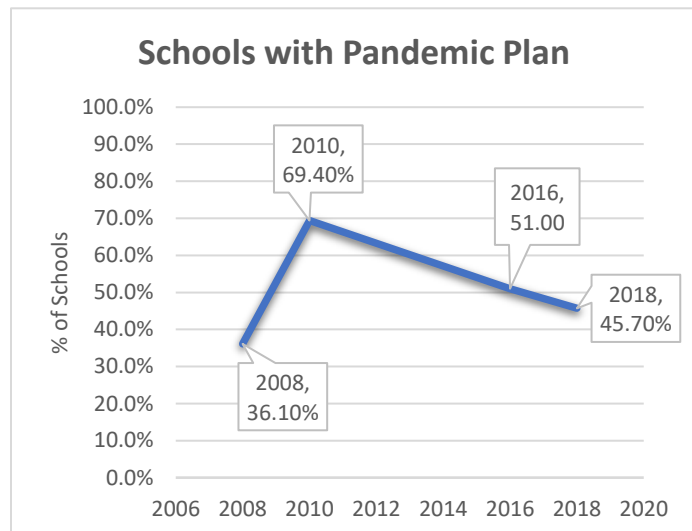
trend away from the Healthy People 2020 goal of 75.9% by 2020 (CDC, 2016). Also, during this time, the percentage of school districts that had district-level councils, committees or teams that were tasked with addressing the management of infectious diseases such as influenza decreased from 51.1% to 39.2% (CDC, 2012; 2016).

Plans for Continuity of Education

One of the primary challenges to schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has been the need to continue providing educational services to students through remote instruction. Whether online, through physical packets, or other mechanism, schools across the country have had to react quickly to develop and scale up remote instruction. As has been documented elsewhere, the types of remote instruction and time taken to embark in such instruction has varied across schools nationwide (Malkus & Christensen, 2020). One potential reason for this is that plans for continuity of education were not ubiquitous prior to the pandemic.

> Only 43% of districts nationwide had crisis plans that included procedures for ensuring continuity of education during school closures.

Data from the CDC's 2016 survey demonstrates that most school districts (88.7%) had plans for implementing unexpected school dismissals or closures but that less than half of school districts (43.0%) included "procedures for ensuring the continuity of education (e.g. online classes or prepackaged assignments) during unplanned school closures" (CDC, 2016).

That the majority of school districts nationwide lacked plans for continuity of education is a striking finding given that the provision of educational services is the core service and mission of public schools. While the likelihood of a global health pandemic was understandably perceived to be low, the potential for disruptions to in-person education from other causes (weather, natural disasters, facility failures, etc.) made the possibility that educational services would need to be administered remotely much higher.

Policy Recommendations

While the scale of disruption to the education system caused by COVID-19 is likely to not be a regularly recurring challenge faced by schools, the current pandemic does point to the need for planning for unlikely crisis situations and the need for schools to be prepared to provide continuity of education regardless of the cause of educational disruption. The following recommendations are provided:

- In line with the Healthy People 2020 goals, increase the percentage of districts that have plans for pandemic diseases.
- Set a goal of having all districts nationwide prepared to provide continuity of educational services when encountering disrupted in-person education.
- Review district plans for other crises that, while unlikely, may need preparedness plans.

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F. Chris Curran, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy and Co-Director of the Education Policy Research Center at the University of Florida's College of Education. His research focuses on issues of equity in education, with a particular emphasis on school safety and discipline. More on his work can be found at www.fchriscurran.com, and he can be contacted at chriscurran@coe.ufl.edu

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