



Office of the  
Washington  
State Auditor  
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# PERFORMANCE AUDIT

## Report Highlights

## K-12 Education During and After the Pandemic:

### Opportunities to learn from changes made in K-12 educational methods

The coronavirus pandemic closed Washington's public schools and forced them to find new ways to teach students. In March 2020, the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus prompted Gov. Jay Inslee to close all public schools in the state for the next six weeks—ultimately extending this for the next six months. The decision to close schools prompted a cascade of change and upheaval in the education system.

During the months schools were closed to in-person learning, the state gave school districts great flexibility in how they decided to ensure students had access to instruction. Funding sources and calculations changed significantly during the pandemic, and many districts took advantage of the stop-gap change in funding to develop new or expand existing online schools. As the first summer of the pandemic ended, calls mounted for children to return to in-person learning. However, some districts found nontraditional practices, including online classes, that they introduced during the pandemic worked better for some students and have retained them. This audit crafted a list of creative and nontraditional teaching practices applied over the past three years that might be useful for other educators. It also considered how other schools might incorporate similar practices and the benefits of doing so.

The audit identified 25 practices in five broad categories.

1. Individualized instruction
2. Access
3. Student and family engagement
4. Teacher training
5. Social-emotional needs

### **Districts used creative practices to deliver instruction outside traditional classrooms, which can be useful beyond a pandemic**

The coronavirus pandemic prompted districts to find new ways for their students to learn outside a classroom. Some districts added or expanded online schools or alternative learning experience (ALE) programs to provide increased flexibility for students and families. When buildings were closed,

some school districts ensured students had access to online classes by providing both internet service and IT equipment. Others took steps to tailor instructional methods to students' needs and engage students and families to ensure new practices succeeded. They also taught teachers how to use the technology they needed to teach remotely. Additionally, some school districts increased their efforts to meet students' social and emotional needs.

## Systemic barriers to sustaining these innovations exist independent of the pandemic

School districts described barriers Washington would need to overcome to implement new practices or continue practices put in place during the pandemic. These include resistance to change and restrictions due to state requirements. Smaller school districts in particular struggle to innovate with fewer staff. In some cases, the return to pre-pandemic funding structures has become a barrier to some practices. Opportunities to address some of these barriers exist, both locally and at the state level.

## State Auditor's Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic was a very difficult time across the nation. Washington was not alone in making emergency changes to its educational system, including shifting most instruction online and changing school funding models to support that transition. The pandemic's effect on the delivery of educational services cannot be overstated; it was dramatic for all concerned. Students, their families and their teachers were all challenged by a sudden switch to online education.

During this major disruption, however, many Washington school districts developed innovative ways to continue learning through a period when so many aspects of daily life were upended. Recognizing the frustrating situation, many of the schools highlighted in this report focused on communication and training, helping parents and teachers work together to deliver the best possible learning experience.

As this report explains, these innovations addressed many different aspects of learning, from individualized instruction and co-teaching to helping students with internet access and holding virtual town halls. They were used in a range of urban, suburban and rural communities, reflecting the diversity of Washington school districts.

It is important to note that, while most students and families welcomed the return of in-person instruction, online learning worked well for some students. Because of those positive experiences, schools have sought to preserve options that only became available to them in the pandemic.

Not all the innovative approaches we identify are necessarily appropriate for every school district or every student, but each is worthy of more examination. Giving these novel approaches more consideration and study ensures that Washington will gain the most benefit from positive advances made in a very challenging time.

## Recommendations

We did not make any recommendations specific to the school districts we audited. Nonetheless, we consider the audit results so broadly applicable that it is in the state's best interest for all districts to consider implementing the practices highlighted in this report. In doing so, districts will also need to take into consideration current and future needs, available resources and potential effects on students and educators.