Discussing the National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19 with the American Institutes for Research

On today's episode, we're joined by Sarah Rand, the Communications Lead for the National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19 project at the American Institutes for Research(AIR). She shared about AIR's national survey that was administered in the summer of 2020, in which over 800 school district and CMO leaders completed. The survey was about school closures, including the timing of school closures due to COVID-19; distance learning approaches and challenges; supporting students with disabilities and English learners; district policies and requirements, such as grading and graduation; staffing and human resources; and health, well-being, and safety. Sarah also outlines some of the most crucial findings and how schools can create action items to promote better learning opportunities for all students.

Mentioned Resources:
National Survey Project:
https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-education-s-response-covid-19

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Transcript of the podcast episode:
Gabrielle Oates: Hello everybody, welcome to the episode. Today, I'm excited to be joined by Sarah Rand from AIR. And so, Sarah is the communications lead for the National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID 19, which is a project at the American Institutes for Research. Welcome Sarah! We're happy to have you on.

Sarah Rand: Thanks so much for having me!

Gabrielle Oates: Absolutely well, as we know, you're leading this project on the national survey so just first for everybody, I would love, if you could share a bit about, first AIR, and then what the project has entailed.

Sarah Rand: Sure sure. Well the American Institutes for Research, or AIR, we are a nonprofit social science, research organization. And our mission is grounded in the fact that we want to generate and

apply really rigorous evidence that makes our world better and more equitable. So there are many issues at play within COVID 19 and the pandemic. When the pandemic began last spring, our leadership team got together and thought about well 'what could our organization do?' You know we're a research organization. We've got smart people who want to help out in education and we wanted to do something to contribute. So we launched a survey. The goals of this survey were to really document the moment, you know. We've never experienced anything like this in recent history. You know, we wanted to just get a sense of what was happening in schools and we wanted to provide really actionable information to educators, policymakers, and researchers to best inform education practices. And I would say, most importantly, and what I'm seeing is that we're really shining a light on the inequities that are persisting and growing, unfortunately, during the pandemic.

Gabrielle Oates: That absolutely makes sense and it's really helpful to have research, such as this, to inform those practice decisions, whether it be for school administrators or teachers. This is great, and I would love to know a bit more about the 'how' behind the survey. Whether that be who was surveyed or what questions were asked, anything like that.

Sarah Rand: Sure, so if you're familiar with research, you know that sometimes it operates quite slowly - at a turtle's pace - but for this project, we have been operating as fast as possible and our researchers are working so hard to make this research accessible and get it out there in a timely way, so it's useful. So back in March, when the pandemic began, our research team got together and started putting together a survey over the course of about a month and a half, which it's pretty quick for a research team, usually that takes months. And we launched the survey in May of 2020 and we administered this survey to over 2500 school districts and about 260 charter management organizations, which made up a representative sample of districts and CMOs across the United States. We had about a 30% response rate. Considering what school leaders were dealing with last summer, you know, the fact that we got 30% of those folks to take the survey is good, so we had about 800 respondents.

The survey asked about a wide variety of things. It asked about school closures, including the timing of school closures due to COVID. It asked about distance learning approaches and challenges, and also asked specifically about supporting students with disabilities and English learners, which are particular groups that have struggled during the pandemic. It also asked about district policies and requirements such as grading and graduation, staffing and human resources from the teacher side of things which we know, has been also affected by the pandemic, and also health, well being, and safety. So it asked about a whole lot of things. The survey was long! It took about 45 minutes to complete.

We administered this survey over the summer, so it was open for about two months, and then we wrote several research briefs that we released this fall. We focused on English learners, students with disabilities and also how district approaches to remote instruction differed across districts across the US.

Gabrielle Oates: Wow and I know that we are sharing some of the information and resources from this survey on EALA's website so that's definitely a great place to check out more. And so, with all that research that you did with the survey, I'm curious - what are some of the main findings from the project so far?

Sarah Rand: Yeah, so we have some interesting findings, some of which, if you've worked in education, you might not find that surprising, but what I find really helpful about this project is that it puts actual numbers and solid data behind those assumptions. So here I'll talk through a couple of the findings and you can read through the research briefs that are listed on the website, our project website, and also that EALA website. So one of the things we found was that there were significant differences in the expected frequency of teacher and student interactions by district characteristics, such as poverty or urbanicity, if they were urban or suburban or rural. And we found that the vast majority of the districts, like 97%, were prioritizing weekly teacher and family communication during spring of 2020.

So we know that teacher and family communication is a super important component of having positive relationships, so it was really encouraging to see that students of all kinds were making teacher and family communication a priority. Another thing we found was that in high poverty districts, and we refer to districts where there's greater than 20% child poverty rate, were less likely than low poverty districts, to say that staff that were trained in social emotional supports were available to all families who need them. So 38% of high poverty districts said that staff trained in SEL supports are available to all families versus in 54% of low poverty districts. So this is important for a couple of reasons. One is that higher poverty communities need support, especially now more than ever, and it also gives you some numbers to work with and to use this evidence, and it also yields district-provided evidence for what we might otherwise suspect.

Another interesting finding was that teacher familiarity with digital learning tools was less likely to be reported as a barrier to teaching and learning equitably during the pandemic in districts where professional development on how to deliver instruction online was widely available before the pandemic. So this makes sense, you know if you're a teacher in a district where you're using online

instruction tools regularly, you know, this was an easier shift for you, when the pandemic happened. So, you know, there was no way for districts to expect or prepare for such a big disruption, with a pandemic, but in the end, we see that districts, who are better prepared and had PD on online instruction for teachers before the pandemic definitely cope with - coped better with the challenges that the pandemic posed.

Related to English learners, which we know is an important group that has been affected by the pandemic, we saw that urban districts were much more likely to provide resources and instructional requirements for English learners than rural districts. And, if you look at our report, you can see there's a couple explanations for this, one of them being that urban districts often have higher percentages of English learners in their districts, so they're more well equipped to provide those resources.

And then the last finding I'll talk about is that it was overwhelmingly difficult for districts to provide Special Education services during this time. I've heard from many parents of special education students that they have really struggled. And this really speaks to a bigger issue about how we support students with disabilities and how we prepare teachers to teach all students. This is getting at some of those equity issues that this project is trying to address. So many of the schools that did well with the transition to virtual learning were the ones that had Universally Designed Instruction already in place. So the extreme difficulty that districts had just puts a spotlight on larger issues already occurring.

Gabrielle Oates: Incredible finding! Like you mentioned, for some people, a lot of those they'll already know whether they have seen it in their classrooms as teachers or they witnessed it as parents of a student, but I think that just provides more information and action items for schools and districts on how to move forward and learn from this year, not just forget it once we can return in person, eventually.

Sarah Rand: I'm hopeful that, despite all the challenges that COVID-19 has caused for teachers and for students and families, that hopefully this has shed a light on some of the inequities and just provided some more information about how we can address those and improve education for all students.

Gabrielle Oates: Absolutely. And I know you shared with this survey and the project overall that it's a continuous effort. It wasn't just that initial questionnaire but that the work is continuing to grow. So what are some of those plans for the next year with the project?

Sarah Rand: Yes, so we are continuing this project into 2021. When we started this in 2020 we obviously did not know how long the pandemic would last. Unfortunately, it still persists and schools are still dealing with challenges, so we still want to address this moment and capture data about what is happening. This project is funded by our AIR equity fund. It's an internal investment project, so we received additional funding to continue the project into 2021. And we just launched our second survey on January 26th. This went out to our original sample of 2500 district superintendents and 260 Charter Management Organization leaders.

We are in the middle of administering that, probably through the month of February, so if you're listening to this and you are a school district leader or CMO leader and you have received an invitation from us to take the survey, please do. Please do!

And then we will administer two more short, what we're calling pulse check surveys, in the spring before the end of the school year just to track what is happening throughout the end of the year. We know that there are so many changes happening before the end of the school year. Obviously, a new change in our administration at the federal level. We know that many State policies are changing. Budgets are changing. You know, with the vaccine rollout hopefully we'll see some light at the end of the tunnel. So we just want to really capture what's happening in this moment.

And then, in February, we are finalizing a few more research briefs that you can find on our project web page. These are about teacher familiarity with digital learning tools, social emotional supports for students, teacher interactions with students and families, and then also how charter management organizations approach remote instruction. So we will share data from the 2021 surveys, as soon as we can. We'll get our researchers working hard very quickly. So we'll share that data on a rolling basis this spring and into the summer to help inform practice and policy.

Gabrielle Oates: Great! I know I know you mentioned the project web page, and of course we want to share more info from AIR, so where can people go to learn more?

Sarah Rand: So the best way to just keep up with this project is to sign up for the AIR newsletter. You can go to air.org and I think at the bottom of the page, you can click to sign up for our newsletter. We will be sharing report releases and updates there. You can also visit our survey project web page on the air.org website. You'll find it linked on the right side of the air.org homepage. You can also follow us on social media on Twitter @AIRInforms and also follow the hashtag #AIRCOVIDSurvey.

And then, in February, we are thrilled to be doing a webinar with EALA to discuss our findings about social emotional support for students! So you can sign up for that at educatingalllearners.org backslash events.

Gabrielle Oates: Yeah, so people want to know more to follow up, definitely check out those websites and follow them on social media. We're excited to partner on more work and share some of these resources for people. Thank you, Sarah for joining us!

Sarah Rand: Thanks so much for having me and check it out!

Gabrielle Oates: And of course, check out more information on the Educating All Learners Alliance on our YouTube channel. Subscribe at Educating All Learners. And follow us on Twitter @educateall_org. Until next time, this is the Educating All Learners Alliance podcast!