PERFORMANCE AUDIT

K-12 Education During and After the Pandemic:

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

November 7, 2023

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Executive Summary

State Auditor's Conclusions (page 28)

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.

> 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
>
> See page 11 for a summary table of all practices.

Background (page 6)

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 as well as the economy.

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.

Districts used creative practices to deliver instruction outside traditional classrooms, which can be useful beyond the coronavirus pandemic
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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 (page 24)

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.

Recommendations (page 29)

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.

Next steps

Our performance audits of state programs and services are reviewed by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) and/or by other legislative committees whose members wish to consider findings and recommendations on specific topics. Representatives of the Office of the State Auditor will review this audit with JLARC's Initiative 900 Subcommittee in Olympia. The public will have the opportunity to comment at this hearing. Please check the JLARC website for the exact date, time, and location (www.leg.wa.gov/JLARC). The Office conducts periodic follow-up evaluations to assess the status of recommendations and may conduct follow-up audits at its discretion. See **Appendix A**, which addresses the I-900 areas covered in the audit. **Appendix B** contains information about our methodology.

Background

> ## 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. This was a controversial decision, but also one that most people expected would expire before the end of the school year. However, in early April, Gov. Inslee announced schools would not reopen to in-person learning until the start of the next school year in September 2020. Most other U.S. states also recommended or ordered that their public schools remain closed for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year. **Exhibit 1** summarizes key actions concerning schools taken by federal, state and local officials during the first years of the pandemic.

Exhibit 1 – A timeline of pandemic school closures, reopenings and related government actions
March 2020 through June 2021

When	What happened
March 13, 2020	Gov. Inslee announced all public schools must close for six weeks.
April 6, 2020	State closed public schools for remainder of 2019-20 school year.
June 22, 2020	The Superintendent of Seattle Public Schools, the largest school district in the state, recommends the district implement remote learning starting in the fall.
Aug. 5, 2020	Gov. Inslee announced the state will allow local health departments and school districts to decide if and how to begin in-person instruction. The state offered guidance around school reopening, and strongly recommended remote learning in places with high COVID-19 infection rates.
Dec. 15, 2020	Washington administered its first dose of COVID-19 vaccine.
Dec. 16, 2020	Gov. Inslee updated guidance for districts determining whether to open to in-person learning based on infection rates.
March 2, 2021	President Biden directed all states to make pre-K teachers and school staff eligible for vaccination.
March 15, 2021	Gov. Inslee signed a proclamation, taking effect April 19, that public schools must offer at least 30 percent of instruction in person.
March 19, 2021	The CDC updated its guidance on social distancing in K-12 schools, saying elementary school students could safely return to in-person classes if everyone in the building wore masks and students stayed at least 3 feet apart.
June 2021	Most U.S. public schools were teaching in person by end of 2020-21 school year.

Source: Federal and state executive orders, advice issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and contemporaneous news accounts.

The decision to close schools prompted a cascade of change and upheaval in the education system as well as the economy. Suddenly, teachers needed to learn completely new methods of instruction while students had to learn how to learn remotely – which some educators and parents viewed as less effective than in-person learning. Parents had to balance supervising their children's online classes while contending with the emotional distress of illness, the financial stress of losing their jobs, or suddenly working from home themselves right alongside their children.

During the months schools were closed to in-person learning, the state gave districts significant flexibility in how they decided to ensure students had access to instruction. Districts also received federal and state grants and emergency funding to explore teaching methods that did not require students to be in a traditional classroom. With the additional funds and the greater flexibility within state requirements, schools tried new practices they would not otherwise have attempted.

As the first summer of the pandemic ended, calls mounted for schools to return to in-person learning. In August 2020, Gov. Inslee announced that districts would decide for themselves if and how to begin in-person instruction. The state strongly recommended remote learning where COVID-19 infection rates were high. When the 2020-21 school year began, most Washington districts offered remote-only or a hybrid of remote and in-person instruction. By November, amid "skyrocketing" infections, a Seattle Times editorial nonetheless called on state leadership to prioritize reopening schools safely and returning to in-person learning.

Students returned to school as vaccination rates increased, but educational flexibility was reduced

The United States launched the first phase of vaccination against COVID-19 in December 2020. In March 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated its guidance on social distancing in K-12 schools, saying that – if everyone in the building wore a mask and maintained at least a three-foot distance from one another – elementary school children could safely return to the classroom.

As Washington schools returned to in-person learning, the flexibility around how to offer education began to wane. In March 2021, about a year after schools were closed due to the pandemic, Washington began requiring that public schools offer at least 30 percent of instruction in person. With the return of in-person instruction, pre-pandemic funding models were also reinstated. By 2022, some districts were no longer able to continue using new practices they had implemented in the previous three years.

Some districts found nontraditional practices introduced in the pandemic worked better for some students and have retained them

Some students found that the different ways of learning or the more flexible schedules offered at the height of the pandemic worked better for them than learning in a traditional classroom setting. Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reported in February 2022 that although remote learning was initially something many families and educators viewed as a stop-gap measure until students could return to in-person learning, a number of families had chosen to continue with virtual or hybrid school programs. Two percent of Washington families made that decision: Roughly 20,000 students found the benefits afforded by these programs outweighed any drawbacks.

Some districts have decided to retain programs introduced during the pandemic, particularly those that educate students outside the traditional classroom. These included online learning, which is education that takes place primarily through the computer, as well as alternative learning experience (ALE) programs, developed to ensure that students have educational opportunities designed to meet their individual needs. Districts have also identified benefits from other new practices that are worth retaining, from those related to staff and teacher training, to increasing family engagement with school and promoting social and emotional learning.

Funding sources and calculations changed significantly during the pandemic

State funding structures allocate money to districts for online students based on a statewide average rate. This means that, for many districts, state allocations per online student are less than what the district would receive for a student participating in in-person settings. The amount schools receive per pupil varies based on a complex formula that considers special education, low-income status and other factors. Some funding is set aside for special programs only. In 2019, the state spent an average of $11,500 per student in basic education funding for a student in a classroom setting, compared to $8,503 for a student in an online course delivered through the ALE model. Note that ALE courses are treated differently, and school districts may claim students in these programs for the purposes of state funding (see sidebar for details).

Special characteristics of Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs

ALE programs provide an individualized course of study for K-12 age children without requiring students to meet the in-class seat-time requirements for traditional instruction. ALE courses may include online courses or courses in which students receive a limited amount of in-person instructional contact outside the traditional classroom.

In addition to offering all students alternative learning opportunities and serving students who may not thrive in traditional settings, ALE programs allow school districts to claim students enrolled in nontraditional programs for the purposes of state funding.

During the pandemic, however, the state adjusted funding rules temporarily, to fund districts for online students at the same rate as in-person students. At the time, remote teaching via online classes was often the only practicable solution for schools to ensure students had access to teachers and instruction. Many districts took advantage of the stop-gap change in funding to develop new or expand existing online schools. Funding rules have since returned to pre-pandemic structures and rates.

In addition to changes in state student funding allocations, the federal government stepped in to help stabilize school systems across the country. As part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Congress allocated roughly $190 billion to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program. Washington's share of ESSER money totaled about $2.6 billion, to be spent in three installments. The last round of ESSER money must be spent by September 2024.

This audit crafted a list of creative and nontraditional teaching practices that might be useful for other educators

This audit looked for nontraditional education practices applied over the past three years. It also considered how other schools might incorporate similar practices and the benefits of doing so. The audit answered the following questions:

- What innovative practices have schools put into place to teach outside a traditional classroom environment?
- How might schools incorporate these new modes of learning?

This audit surveyed 11 school districts (listed in the sidebar), identified by K-12 stakeholders, that implemented or expanded practices during the pandemic that could be useful to other districts. The practices described by these districts may have also been used by districts other than those mentioned in this report. The map in **Exhibit 2** on the following page shows the districts we surveyed. In addition, we surveyed Impact Public Schools, which operates four charter schools in Renton, Seattle, Tacoma and Tukwila. We also discussed the health clinic in the Elma School District with staff from Educational Service District 113. Impact Schools and Elma are not shown on the map.

Washington has some data about the effect of the pandemic on learning, but there are gaps around students' academic progress due to challenges conducting student assessments during the 2020-21 school year. Due to these gaps in student outcomes data, the effects of innovative practices this audit reports on were gathered using qualitative methods rather than quantitative data. See Appendix B for more information about our methodology.

The surveyed school districts

Bellevue

Bethel

Camas

Lind-Ritzville

Monroe

North Kitsap

Northshore

Pasco

Tacoma

Walla Walla

Yakima

Exhibit 2 – Map of school districts surveyed for this audit

Surveyed districts shown in blue

Source: https://k12wa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=7db7e443cd5c4f36a8355bc55cfb04c4
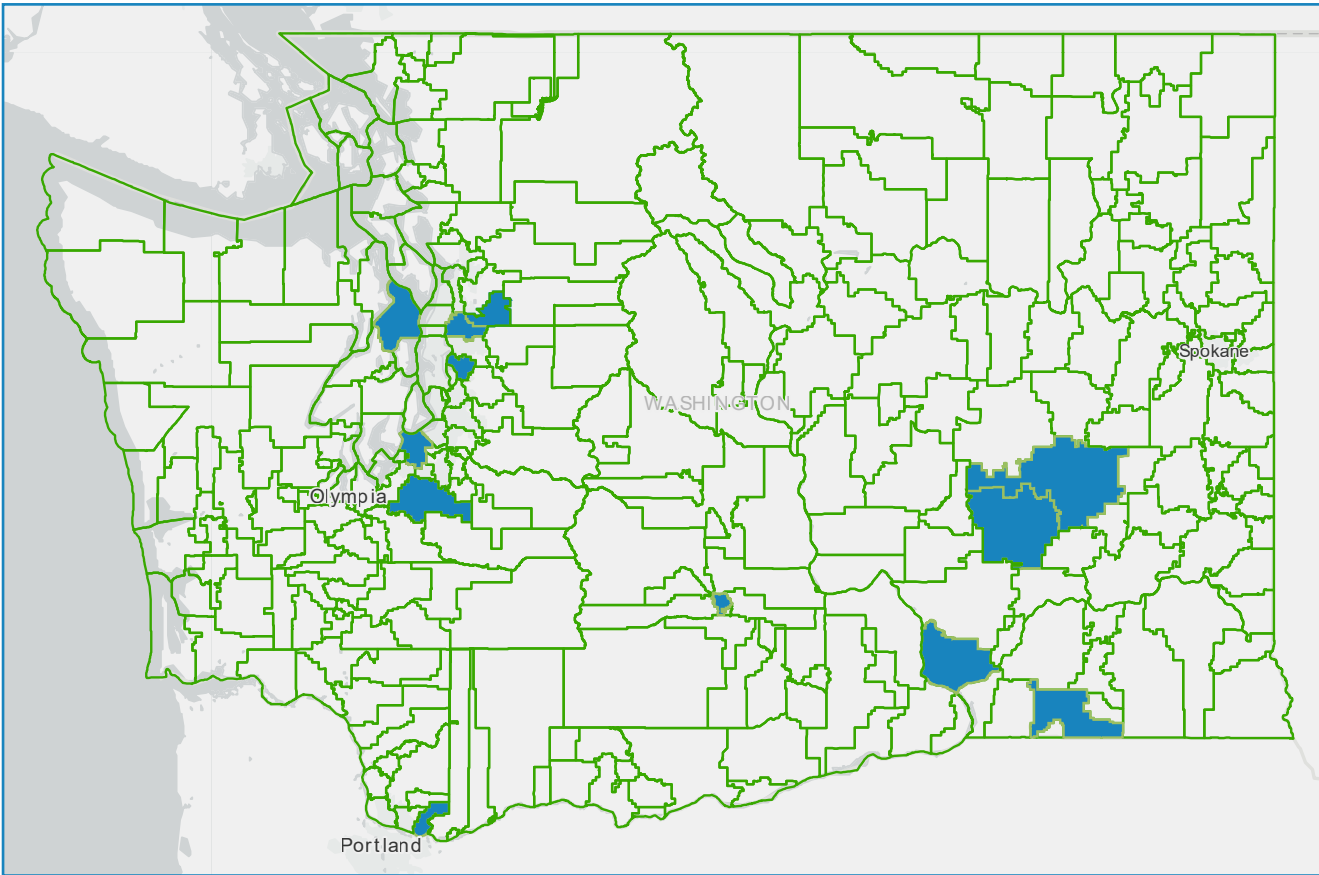
Summary of practices identified during the audit

Many surveyed school districts may have applied multiple practices at various times during the 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. All activities and benefits we discuss in the following pages were self-reported by the districts. We did not attempt to confirm individual district results.

Topic area	Summary of practice	Page in report
1. **Individualized** **instruction**	Creating or expanding online schools	13
	Creating or expanding Alternative Learning Experience schools	14
	Partnering with other districts to get students access to more online courses	14
	Offering around-the-clock online tutoring	15
	Using co-teachers to segment the classroom into different level groups	16
	Using standards- or mastery-based learning	16
	Small reading groups and remedial tutoring groups	16
2. **Access**	Providing devices and/or wireless internet hotspots to students	17
	Wireless internet network covering the entire school district	17
	Arranged for internet provider to supply service for only $9 a month to families eligible for free and reduced-price meals	17
3. **Student** **and family** **engagement**	Conducting or allowing access to board meetings and meetings with families via video	19
	Posting information to the district website in languages spoken at students' homes	19
	Conducting virtual town hall meetings for families in four languages	19
	Setting up "help desks" during key changes to ensure students and families got immediate technical support	19
	Calling families to inform them about upcoming key changes	19
	Modifying bell schedules to offer students more credits, greater schedule flexibility	19
4. **Teacher** **training**	Training educators for teaching in an online learning environment	20
	Offering virtual and asynchronous training opportunities for educators	21
	Districts training other districts on how to provide remote instruction	21
5. **Social-** **emotional** **needs**	Greeting students at the school building door	22
	Providing opportunities for students to talk about issues	22
	Providing telemedicine and remote counseling for students who could not be at school	22
	Setting up a school-based clinic to provide health care to students	22
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	Providing student behavioral and mental health interventions through the Statewide Behavioral Health COVID Response Project	23

Audit Results

Districts used creative practices to deliver instruction outside traditional classrooms, which can be useful beyond the coronavirus pandemic

Results in brief

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, to engage students and families to ensure new practices succeeded, and to train 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.

The coronavirus pandemic prompted districts to find new ways for their students to learn outside a classroom

Washington schools closed to in-person learning during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, forcing the K-12 education system to scramble to find ways to continue educating students. Schools turned to remote learning: Teachers interacted with students through digital web conferencing platforms like Zoom and asked students to turn in assignments electronically. While many schools operated this way temporarily, as a way to continue providing instruction when students and teachers could not meet in person, some school districts established dedicated online schools that they intended to operate after the state allowed in-person learning to resume. Others decided that hybrid class offerings – conducted partly in person, partly online – were beneficial and worth pursuing even as in-person teaching became the norm.

The pandemic-related school closures are over, but the benefits of giving students alternative ways to learn have demonstrated their value. Perhaps the most enduring benefit is the flexibility these teaching modes offered students. For example,

students could keep up with assignments while isolating or quarantining at home whenever they felt well enough to do schoolwork. Further, schools and school districts find they are better prepared for the next emergency, and they are better preparing more students for life in the internet-connected world of the future.

1.   Individualized instruction

Some districts added or expanded online schools or alternative learning experience (ALE) programs to provide increased flexibility for students and families

Many districts launched or expanded online schools during the pandemic in an effort to keep students' education on track. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reported it approved dozens of new online programs: 78 in the 2020-21 school year and 57 in the 2021-22 school year. Districts that added or expanded online schools said they saw students outperform expectations after the pandemic. One district said it saw less student learning loss than it expected.

They also said some students in the new online schools achieved higher scores on academic tests than they did before when they attended school in person. These new online schools were created with support from OSPI, federal stimulus money and community partnerships.

Among the districts that implemented or expanded online schools, we noted Tacoma, Northshore, Yakima, Pasco, North Kitsap, Everett and Lind-Ritzville. Two surveyed districts that set up new online schools during the pandemic described specific advantages to offering students online school options.

- **Walla Walla School District's online school helped avoid student learning loss overall, and saw some students thrive in the online learning environment.** District students outperformed state and nationwide peers as evaluated by the online reading and math assessment tool iReady, which suggests they experienced less academic regression during the pandemic. The district continues to offer online school as an option because it found that some students "thrived" online; about 150 students want to continue attending school online.

- **Camas School District introduced the remote Camas Connect Academy in the 2020-21 school year, and found some students preferred that learning style.** The Academy is a fully certified alternative learning experience (ALE) school. Coursework is mostly delivered online, but the Academy also offers monthly field trips and in-person activities including the learning lab that provides drop-in support for students three days a week. District officials said many educators, parents and students realized during the pandemic that "online learning really works for them." The school has enrolled about 220 children, and between 50 and 60 of them participate in the in-person events.

Some surveyed districts have found ways to continue offering their students the option of online school despite losing the temporary funding they received during the pandemic. Two districts said being able to offer a wide selection of courses was integral to their ongoing success.

- **Everett School District partnered with the online program Spokane Virtual Learning to offer more online courses to its secondary school students.** Everett embarked on a partnership with Spokane Public Schools during the pandemic that has continued and was expected to continue in the 2023-24 school year. It did so to build up its online course offerings for high school students without having to start its own program from scratch, choosing Spokane's program because it already aligned with state standards and worked well with Everett's online course management system. Such a partnership can particularly benefit smaller districts, which have a limited number of teachers and course options. In this type of arrangement, students in a smaller, rural district could access online courses taught by teachers in other districts without having to travel burdensome or prohibitive distances.

- **Walla Walla attracted sufficient enrollment to make its online program self-sustaining.** Like many districts, Walla Walla made use of temporary pandemic funding and grants to bolster an online instructional program. The online program became so popular that about 150 students continue in the program. With the per-student funding the district receives from the state, this enrollment is sufficient to allow the district to provide five dedicated program teachers, support staff, curriculum and learning resources. .

The pandemic also saw growth in ALE programs. OSPI has reported that the statewide average monthly student headcount in ALE programs grew from around 34,000 in the 2018-19 school year to just under 50,000 in 2022-23. Several surveyed districts expanded their existing ALE programs to offer more students the benefits of ALE's inherent flexibility. In these programs, some or all of the instruction is delivered outside of a regular classroom schedule, either online or in person.

- **Northshore School District found its pandemic-driven online classes so popular, it established the Northshore Online Academy ALE program.** The Academy was developed to respond to students' and families' need for flexibility and their preference for learning online. It allows students to choose when and how to learn to suit the ways they process information, their comfort level working directly with others and their schedules. District officials said these students "continue to do well compared to previous school years."

- **Walla Walla transformed its Lincoln High School into a hybrid on- and off-site ALE program that allows students flexible access to learning.** The district continued the program after pandemic restrictions were removed because many students liked the model so much, including the fact that it is not bound by quarter or semester schedules. Students told educators that working on assignments at home, while still having access to features such as science labs, teacher support and regular in-person meetings, worked well for them. The program offers these students "the best of both worlds … the opportunity to do some work at home and come in for [consultation] with a teacher when they need [additional help or support]."

Some districts took steps to tailor instructional methods to students' needs

Apart from expanding online learning or ALE programs, districts seized the opportunity to tailor instruction to meet individual students' needs and skills. Leading practices say students learn best when instruction is adjusted to their optimal way of learning. Tailored instruction can allow a student more time to absorb course material and review areas as needed, while those who grasp it more quickly can move on to the next lesson. Individualized instruction can also allow students to customize when they learn, studying at the time of day that works best for them or accommodating other responsibilities such as a job.

- **Yakima used federal funds to purchase access to around-the-clock online tutoring for students in grades 3-12.** The district introduced the service because it saw students were accessing their online material late at night when their household's use of the internet connection was lowest. The support tutors could respond to students at times that worked best for the students. The district continues to offer the service in both English and Spanish.

Students can access online tutoring in English or Spanish from this page on Yakima School District's website

- **Schools lowered student-teacher ratios, which could allow teachers to spend more time with each student.** Districts initially did this in response to social distancing requirements that restricted the number of students permitted in a classroom at the same time. In an example of an innovative way schools reduced their student-teacher ratios, Impact Public Schools used a co-teaching model with more than one teacher in a class, which allowed it to segment the class into smaller groups.

- **Lind-Ritzville implemented "mastery-based learning," in which students advance through content at their own pace determined by when they master it.** The district participated in the State Board of Education's Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative, which identifies best practices and sample tools for implementing mastery-based learning and offers professional education on the subject for teachers, principals and counselors. The district's qualitative results showed improved classroom culture and participation among students, as well as greater job satisfaction among teachers. District representatives added, "Even athletic academic eligibility and participation has increased."

- **Impact Public Schools applied "high-dosage tutoring" techniques to online classes to help individual students improve targeted academic needs.** In high-dosage tutoring, an instructor works one-on-one or with a small group of students, focusing on remediation of content – often reading or arithmetic. Impact's tutors used online video breakout rooms to meet with students for 25 to 45 minutes a week. The reading groups consisted of four to six students, small enough to allow tutors to provide highly targeted instruction based on what the students needed that day. For participating students, Impact saw quicker reading growth for first- through third-grade children than it had seen during in-person instruction.

2. Access

When buildings were closed, some school districts ensured students had access to online classes by providing both internet service and IT equipment

The dramatic expansion of online schools and at-home learning after March 2020 meant most students suddenly needed access to a computer or similar device plus access to the internet. For remote learning to be most effective, leading practice research says all students should have ready access to internet-connected computer equipment. When schools can help students gain access to these tools, they help ensure student learning will not be interrupted by future health emergencies or simpler disruptions like snow days. Several districts described ways they addressed these needs during the coronavirus pandemic.

- **Ensure every student had access to a laptop or tablet computer.** For example, Yakima School District issued 16,000 laptops to students in two weeks, starting with high school students who were under pressure to meet graduation requirements then moving successively to younger students. The district chose laptops with hard drives, rather than cheaper cloud-based laptops like the Chromebook that rely on internet connections to access software, so students could do schoolwork even when they lacked a connection. The district provided training for students and parents to help them use the laptops effectively for schoolwork.

- **Provide internet access to students using innovative methods.** For example, in addition to distributing laptops to students, Yakima School District developed a districtwide wireless internet network with help from the community. The district partnered with property owners around the city to place wireless signal repeaters atop the tallest buildings and trees and so extend the district's wireless internet signal. Northshore partnered with service providers to obtain discounted wireless internet hotspots. The Washington State School Directors Association said that one school district negotiated a deal with a service provider to charge families who qualified for free and reduced-price meals only $9 a month for internet access.

A note about use of federal funds

Some of the practices identified in this section involve districts' use of federal funds to buy computers for students. One source of this money was the national Emergency Connectivity Fund, a $7.17 billion program created through the American Rescue Act of 2021 and administered by the Federal Communications Commission and the Universal Service Administrative Company. The fund's purpose was to assist K-12 students and educational staff who lacked access to laptops or tablets and broadband connections sufficient for them to engage in remote learning. In Washington, school districts used the program funds to purchase millions of dollars' worth of computers to allow for off-site student learning.

Federal funds are governed by federal rules, which must be followed – even in emergency situations. Some school districts have received findings in their recent federal single audits related to these types of purchases.

The State Auditor's Office has not questioned the program's purposes or whether individual school districts succeeded in their efforts to help students through the program. However, our audits must follow federal rules, and so we have had to report that, as of publication, quite a few school districts were not in compliance with requirements of this federal program to date. Although we have also questioned costs in these audits, we have not reported any loss of public funds. In most cases, these findings and questioned costs are related to a lack of documentation showing compliance with federal requirements. Our Office has engaged in discussions with local, state and federal officials regarding the clarity of the guidance issued by the federal program.

3.   Student and family engagement

School districts engaged students and families to ensure new practices succeeded

Districts made significant efforts to engage students and families, which was crucial due to the rapid pace of change driven by the evolving rules of the pandemic. Leading practice research shows that students with strong family involvement in their education have better educational outcomes. Because schools were often forced to change how they operated as the pandemic progressed, they had more information than ever to communicate to families. Most in-person gatherings were

prohibited, so parents could no longer attend school board meetings or parent-teacher conferences in person as they once did. Surveyed schools said that they identified several new ways to engage with both students and their families.

- **Stakeholders told us that several districts saw parental attendance increase when they conducted meetings over video.** This was true of both parent-teacher and school board meetings. Some districts continue to make meetings available in a video conference format due to the increased attendance. A stakeholder added that the video school board meetings also increased transparency.

- **Some districts increased efforts to communicate in languages other than English.** Impact Public Schools conducted virtual town halls in four languages using professional translators to share information and engage families. Stakeholders told us that Federal Way used its website to provide information about coronavirus-related resources and remote learning in the languages spoken at home by their students' families.

- **Impact Public Schools attributed its high attendance rate (97 percent) during online instruction to how well it prepared and engaged students' families.** Impact set up online "help desks" to ensure families could get immediate technical support when using unfamiliar computers and software. Impact's teachers also used dedicated professional development time to make personal calls to families regarding key educational changes, so they could gauge their readiness for those changes. Impact staff said that applying these practices also helped schools meet families' needs when students returned in person. However, putting them into action required Impact and its teachers to have flexibility to experiment, staff to explain new technology to families and funding to pay for that staffing and to buy needed materials.

- **A stakeholder said Sunnyside and Bellingham modified their schedules to offer more credits to their high school students.** Bellingham School District extended its schedule to an eight-period day in the fall of 2017 but adjusted how the eight-period day was delivered during the pandemic, changing to focused four-period blocks. That stakeholder told us the school districts saw better graduation rates, more students going to college and reduced rates for disciplinary actions after modifying their schedules to accommodate additional credit hours.
  Further, as stakeholders described, students and families in those districts said they felt they could relax because the schedule allowed students flexibility, and students said they now had courses they could look forward to. The Association of Washington State Principals said having long-tenured leaders helped these districts make such significant schedule changes to achieve the goal of offering a wider variety of classes and "more interesting classes beyond what is needed to meet the 24-credit graduation requirement." Staff at Bellingham noted that one goal of the shift to an eight-period day was to provide students with a more robust selection of course options beyond core graduation requirements.

- **Lind-Ritzville reorganized its teaching and term schedules, from seven periods a day in semesters to five periods a day in trimesters.** District officials said the change in scheduling offered students multiple benefits. The trimester schedule made it easier for students to complete College in the Classroom courses, allowed them to take more courses to accumulate credits more quickly and gave them more opportunity to recover if they failed a course. And even though the school day's start and end times were unchanged, the new schedule allowed time for in-depth learning in each period. Students had fewer transitions and fewer classes to manage and said they "liked the reduction in periods."

4.   Teacher training

School districts taught teachers how to use the technology they needed to teach remotely

Like their students, educators also faced a steep learning curve in using new technology and tools needed to teach. Districts pivoted from in-person workshops for teacher training and sought new ways to help teachers teach effectively in learning environments they might not be especially familiar with. Leading practice research shows that delivering high-quality remote education requires teachers to be well versed in specific methods, which demand a somewhat different skillset than in-person teaching. School districts in our survey used various tools and techniques to help staff be as prepared as possible for the sudden shift to new methods of teaching.

- **Yakima focused on teacher effectiveness in online and hybrid class environments.** Federal funds helped pay for trainings that focused on effective teaching techniques in new teaching settings. These trainings also addressed teaching effectively in "flipped" classrooms, in which students first study new material at home by reading or viewing a video about the concept, then use in-person or online learning time with a teacher for related interactive activities. These sessions allow students to interact with the teacher and each other to ensure they understand the material. Some Yakima teachers now use the practice of "flipped" classrooms.

- **Monroe School District hired an instructional technology consultant to provide distance-learning trainings, including strategies to increase student voice and engagement.** The district's teachers generally used traditional methods of teaching: these trainings taught them about increasing student choice and input into what and how they learned.

The trainings also discussed learning management system tools and how to use them to engage students. The district can run reports from the learning management system to see how often teachers use the tools. District leaders said they have observed, and heard from teachers, that the tools and strategies from the training have increased student voice and engagement.

Monroe also gained support for training on remote learning from community experts and collaborated with other districts and organizations. District officials added that the strategies gleaned from these trainings can be applied to in-person learning, for example by using the learning management system to create and distribute course content electronically, or to communicate with students and their families.

- **Northshore experienced continued demand for virtual and asynchronous (see sidebar) trainings, with higher teacher participation than for in-person trainings.** To help prepare for this shift in training modes, the district worked with Learning Forward, a professional development organization for educators. A small team of district staff participated in the organization's "Developing Professional Learning in a Virtual World" network during the 2021-22 school year. The team gained access to information related to the design and implementation of online professional learning, virtual conferences, customized coaching and other resources.

Asynchronous learning allows trainees to access materials and interact with others on their own schedule without the need for real-time interaction with a live instructor or facilitator. This differs from synchronous learning, which does require such real-time interaction.

- **Impact Public Schools shared its knowledge and resources with educators in other schools and districts.** Impact partnered with the Rural Alliance — a rural education leadership collaborative supporting outcomes for Washington's rural students from birth through post-secondary education. Together, they provided teacher training sessions on remote instruction for the schools in the consortium. Impact also made its remote learning resources widely available to other schools and districts through hosting an open webinar, posts on its website, social media links and newsletters.

- **State and regional agencies offered professional development trainings to educators statewide.** OSPI and the nine educational service districts (ESDs) offered teachers free, online and asynchronous trainings related to remote learning. The ESDs contracted with a remote-learning consultant to develop a series of trainings that can apply to a variety of learning management systems.
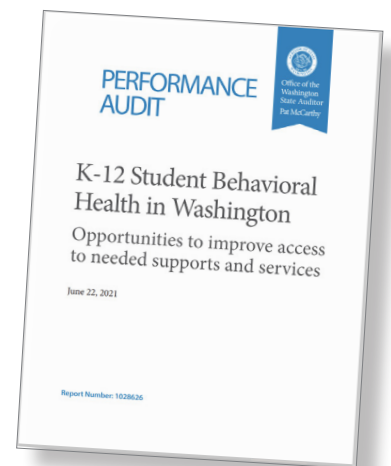
5.   Social-emotional needs

School districts increased their efforts to meet students' social and emotional needs

The pandemic highlighted the role schools play in students' social and emotional learning, as students struggled with stress, loss and isolation. Leading practices research shows that effective education must recognize and address students' social and emotional needs. Washington currently lacks a statewide social emotional learning curriculum, which means that school districts must look elsewhere to find help supporting their students. To learn more about behavioral health supports in schools, read our report K-12 Student Behavioral Health in Washington.

- **Staff at Monroe School District focused attention on the social and emotional needs of students to help reduce barriers to learning from pandemic-related trauma.** Staff instituted activities that ensured they met students' social and emotional needs in addition to their physical and intellectual needs. For example, they greeted students at the door and gave children opportunities to talk about problems they were having. Teachers are offering more schoolwide social-emotional strategies as well as providing targeted supports to remedy problems.

- **Elma School District partnered with ESD 113 to set up a school-based health clinic for elementary school students.** The ESD helped the small rural district develop the clinic using temporary federal funds and a federal grant. The clinic provides dental and vision care and well-child checks, as well as mental health care through the Student Assistance Program. It is the ESD's first such clinic, and ESD staff said they are looking into ways to do another school-based clinic project. They also said they continue to provide some telehealth services, but parents of elementary school age students preferred an in-person clinic.

- **After Bellevue School District's counselors began providing online services, almost 90 percent of students receiving mental health services reported improved coping skills.** The district used grants and temporary federal funds to make a substantial investment in its mental health services. It allowed the district to implement mental health screenings and offer services to students identified as needing coping strategies. In grades 7-10, the district screened half of its students twice a year. At least 350 students received some form of services in the 2022-23 school year. Bellevue officials added that if schools are going to screen students for mental health, they should be prepared to provide services as well.

PERFORMANCE AUDIT — Office of the Washington State Auditor Pat McCarthy

K-12 Student Behavioral Health in Washington

Opportunities to improve access to needed supports and services

June 22, 2021

Report Number: 1028626

Read the report on our website: portal.sao.wa.gov/ReportSearch/Home/ViewReportFile?arn=1028626&isFinding=false&sp=false

- **ESD 113 supported its school districts with a variety of social and emotional learning programs.** The ESD, which is based in Tumwater and includes districts in Grays Harbor, Lewis, Mason, Pacific and Thurston counties, said all its school districts are using some kind of social and emotional learning programs. Schools have several programs to choose from, including Life Skills, Sanford Harmony and the Good Behavior Game, among others. Another example is Character Strong, a program that aims to develop thoughtful, healthy people who have skills such as social awareness, responsible decision-making and developing and maintaining relationships.

- **The Statewide Behavioral Health COVID Response Project reported that its interventions improved mental and emotional wellness among students it served.** These effects included fewer discipline problems, reduced substance use and greater self-awareness, including self-regulation and asking for help. The Project, set up by the Association of Educational Service Districts and the University of Washington, was implemented in 52 districts across the state. It aims to expand school-based behavioral health services in response to increased student needs resulting from the pandemic. In addition to providing social and emotional learning curriculum and awareness campaigns on subjects such as mental health and preventing bullying and suicide, it endeavors to increase the number of school behavioral health staff.

Systemic barriers to sustaining these innovations exist independent of the pandemic

Answer in brief

School districts described barriers Washington would need to overcome to implement new practices or continue practices put into place during the pandemic. These include resistance to change and restrictions on actions districts can take due to state requirements. Smaller school districts struggle to innovate with fewer staff, and 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.

School districts described barriers Washington would need to overcome to implement new practices or continue practices put into place during the pandemic

Certain long-standing school practices that were suspended during the height of the pandemic have since returned. Some are state requirements, like "seat-time," which defines the number of hours a year that a student must be sitting in the classroom for that student to be funded under basic education funding calculations. Others are simply traditional, like the structure of the school year and school-day schedules. Whether in place by law or by tradition, surveyed school districts identified these and other practices as systemic barriers to innovation and experimentation. The specific barriers various school district officials described to us fall into two broad areas:

- Resistance to change – from educators as much as students and families

- Restrictions on actions districts can take due to state requirements, and their effect on funding

Resistance to change. Education in general is still based in an agrarian model, running from September to June so children could help on the farm in summer months. To meet the needs of today's students requires the flexibility to "do school differently." That may mean reformulating the school year to trimesters instead of semesters or enacting a year-round balanced calendar. Some schools that did so described less learning loss in their students during and after the pandemic. However, parents may initially be resistant to such sweeping changes, for example if they find it difficult to manage the shorter, more frequent school breaks.

Parents may also be hesitant to embrace a move to online learning. More widely, school officials noted that there is a perception among the public that in-person education is best, which contributes to negative perceptions of online learning. In addition, some educators may resist changes that affect how students access education, especially changes that involve learning new systems and technology. One district official described it this way: "New always feels like more, and when they don't see something old being taken off their plates there will be pushback." The same official added that some teachers have been fighting against online learning and would prefer to continue teaching in the way they already know.

Restrictions on actions districts can take due to state requirements, and their effect on funding. In the view of some districts, they are prevented from offering virtual learning, with flexible schedules, because of the laws that govern what a school day and year must look like. To be funded under basic education funding calculations, students must be sitting in their seats in front of a teacher for a certain number of hours per day – these are known as seat-time requirements. Such perceived barriers affect various non-traditional programs. Those include online programs in which students are no longer sitting in the classroom for a certain amount of hours a day to learn set lessons, and the mastery-based learning models, in which students move forward after demonstrating competency. The expectation for students to be in person all day without a penalty to the school district related to funding is limiting, districts and state education associations agreed.

Smaller school districts struggle to innovate with fewer staff

In smaller school districts, the work that goes into developing, launching and maintaining new practices and programs usually falls to school administrators, including district staff and superintendents. They are also responsible for ensuring teachers are prepared, families are informed and students are supported as the new program is rolled out in their schools. Large school districts may be able to afford additional support personnel to help in these tasks. Smaller districts are expected to carry out the same work but with fewer employees, which can affect smaller districts' ability to continue trying out new practices.

One district official pointed out that administrators and counselors at small, rural districts perform the same duties as their counterparts at larger, urban districts, as well as extra duties typically performed by other personnel in larger districts. That extra workload can diminish the time rural administrators have available to research and implement new practices. For example, they might need to first research the possible costs and benefits of an innovative program, then assemble teacher-counselor-principal teams to develop the strategies and multiple assessments needed to put a new practice in place.

When asked about the types of supports that helped them implement new practices, small districts did not mention receiving state assistance. OSPI and educational service districts representatives said they do offer some support, but did not describe in detail the types of support available and it was unclear which entity was responsible for front-line help for small, rural districts.

The return to pre-pandemic funding structures has become a barrier to some practices

School districts face new challenges as the emergency phase of the pandemic winds down and schools return to "the new normal." Among other issues contributing to financial problems for public education is a statewide drop in school enrollment during the pandemic. Enrollment for kindergarten through grade 12 was still down about 38,000 students in 2022 compared to 2019. With fewer children enrolled, the amount of money from state school funding calculations drops, in some cases significantly.

In addition, the return to pre-pandemic methods of calculating funding for online students versus in-person students may see some newly established online courses and programs falter for want of funding. School districts that found it difficult to develop robust online-student enrollment numbers may struggle to maintain the programs, even if they were well-liked by students and parents during pandemic building closures.

Finally, aside from changes in basic education state funding, temporary funding sources have by and large ended. The last round of federal ESSER funding, for example, must be spent by September 2024. The loss of these more flexible funds in particular poses a barrier to districts that want to implement new practices or maintain practices they set in motion during the pandemic.

These additional funds often helped districts not only afford to offer online learning but also to provide devices and internet access to participate in the classes. The loss of funds that could be used for technology purchases may become a barrier to continuing these online programs. For example, the laptops, tablets and other computing devices districts purchased for students at the beginning of the pandemic are now approaching the end of their recommended service life. One district said they understand they are expected to propose technology levies to raise funds that will allow them to continue providing this access to students, rather than be given money by the state.

Opportunities to address some of these barriers exist, both locally and at the state level

During the audit, we also discussed our survey results with representatives from the ESDs and OSPI. We did so to understand what school districts might do locally to resolve some of the perceived barriers to introducing new practices and what

changes might require action at a higher level in the state. Although OSPI and ESDs reportedly have supports available for district staff, not all districts we surveyed appeared to be aware of them.

OSPI officials noted that the number of days and hours required in a school year are defined at the legislative level. However, there is no specific requirement for what an individual district calendar looks like. OSPI recommends districts consider developing ALE programs, which offer greater flexibility for students compared with traditional classroom settings.

They added that the debate over seat-time-based funding versus competency-based funding is a conversation that will take several years of workgroup discussion involving the Legislature to attain the level of flexibility districts want.

Finally, OSPI officials said the agency supports the need for continued investment in IT devices and internet access for students. They added that an essential question policymakers and stakeholders will need to decide is whether online education is equal to in-person education and proceed accordingly regarding funding and resource decisions.

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

This performance audit focused on capturing the variety of nontraditional and creative approaches Washington school districts employed during and immediately after the emergency restrictions on in-person learning during the coronavirus pandemic, in the 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. For this reason, it makes no recommendations to any of the school districts and educational service districts surveyed during the audit.

Guidance for all Washington school districts

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.

Agency Response

All audited school districts were sent a copy of the final report to review, with an invitation to send a formal response if they wished to comment on the audit. The districts opted to send one, unified response to the audit, which was assembled and delivered by Yakima School District.

![Yakima School District logo]

Yakima
SCHOOL DISTRICT
DISTRITO ESCOLAR
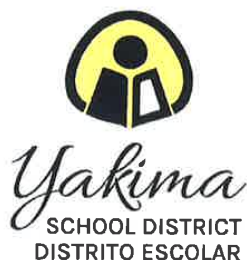
104 N. 4th Avenue
Yakima, WA 98902

(509) 573-7000
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October 25, 2023

RE: Response to performance audit on "K-12 Education During and After the Pandemic"

Dear Office of the Washington State Auditor,

We, participating superintendents and districts representative of the great state of Washington, express our profound appreciation to all who participated in the comprehensive compilation and analysis of this audit. The completed narrative not only showcases the resilience and adaptability of our education system but also sets a promising direction for our future endeavors. The PK-12 system, as a whole, should be proud of the post-pandemic work by representative districts.

The overwhelming challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic transformed our educational landscape overnight. Our teachers, students, and families found themselves navigating uncharted waters. Yet, as emphasized in the report, a crisis reveals character and resiliency, as challenges led to a wave of innovation and creativity. School districts, tapping into the spirit of adaptability, introduced methods that, in many cases, proved revolutionary. The diverse array of initiatives—ranging from tailored instruction, access to online resources, bolstered student and family engagement, to prioritizing teacher training and student socio-emotional needs—reflects a system in active evolution.

We are especially heartened by the acknowledgment of the diverse instructional approaches that emerged. While virtual learning might not resonate with every learner, it undoubtedly has its rightful place in the broader spectrum of educational offerings. As we envision the future, we must ensure that beneficial innovative methods remain an integral part of our educational fabric.

The recommendations of the audit underscore the broader relevance and significance of these novel practices. As superintendents, we urge all stakeholders—educators,
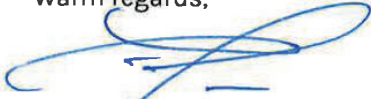
Strengthening Community Through Education

Yakima School District encourages workforce diversity and complies with all state and federal laws prohibiting unlawful discrimination.

administrators, or policymakers—to imbibe these insights and collaboratively shape a more dynamic, inclusive, and efficient education system.

In closing, our collective gratitude and support for this insightful report, as findings and recommendations promise to be valuable as we chart our course in the post-pandemic world. Washington's school districts have demonstrated commendable agility and foresight, and we stand united in our optimism for the path ahead.

Warm regards,

Superintendent Trevor Greene, Ed.D.
Yakima School District

Appendix A: Initiative 900 and Auditing Standards

Initiative 900 requirements

Initiative 900, approved by Washington voters in 2005 and enacted into state law in 2006, authorized the State Auditor's Office to conduct independent, comprehensive performance audits of state and local governments.

Specifically, the law directs the Auditor's Office to "review and analyze the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of the policies, management, fiscal affairs, and operations of state and local governments, agencies, programs, and accounts." Performance audits are to be conducted according to U.S. Government Accountability Office government auditing standards.

In addition, the law identifies nine elements that are to be considered within the scope of each performance audit. The State Auditor's Office evaluates the relevance of all nine elements to each audit. The table below indicates which elements are addressed in the audit. Specific issues are discussed in the Results and Recommendations sections of this report.

I-900 element	Addressed in the audit
1. Identify cost savings	No.
2. Identify services that can be reduced or eliminated	No.
3. Identify programs or services that can be transferred to the private sector	No.
4. Analyze gaps or overlaps in programs or services and provide recommendations to correct them	No.
5. Assess feasibility of pooling information technology systems within the department	No.

I-900 element	Addressed in the audit
6. Analyze departmental roles and functions, and provide recommendations to change or eliminate them	**No.**
7. Provide recommendations for statutory or regulatory changes that may be necessary for the department to properly carry out its functions	**No.**
8. Analyze departmental performance data, performance measures and self-assessment systems	**No.**
9. Identify relevant best practices	**Yes.** The audit identified best practices for remote K-12 education through a literature review, our survey and interviews with educators.

Compliance with generally accepted government auditing standards

We conducted this performance audit under the authority of state law (RCW 43.09.470), approved as Initiative 900 by Washington voters in 2005, and in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards as published in *Government Auditing Standards* (July 2018 revision) issued by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The mission of the Office of the Washington State Auditor

To provide citizens with independent and transparent examinations of how state and local governments use public funds, and develop strategies that make government more efficient and effective. The results of our work are widely distributed through a variety of reports, which are available on our website and through our free, electronic subscription service. We take our role as partners in accountability seriously. We provide training and technical assistance to governments and have an extensive quality assurance program. For more information about the State Auditor's Office, visit www.sao.wa.gov.

Appendix B: Objectives, Scope and Methodology

Objectives

The purpose of this performance audit was to identify nontraditional education practices implemented over the past three years and ways other schools could incorporate similar practices moving forward. The audit answers the following questions:

1. How have schools innovated in response to needing to teach outside a traditional learning environment?

2. How can schools incorporate these new modes of learning?

For reporting purposes, the audit results have been organized into key findings. The messages relate to the original objectives as follows:

- Districts used creative practices to deliver instruction outside traditional classrooms, which can be useful beyond the coronavirus pandemic — This finding addresses Objective 1 and Objective 2.

- Systemic barriers to sustaining these innovations exist independent of the pandemic – This finding addresses Objective 2.

Scope

This audit reports on education practices Washington school districts put into place in response to the need to teach outside the traditional classroom due to the coronavirus pandemic. For inclusion in the audit report, these practices had to either be new to the district or expanded since March 2020, when Washington's public schools were closed to in-person learning. In addition, the practice had to be one that the district wanted to continue or that might be useful to other districts.

This audit also considered how these practices could be expanded in the future. In addition to the practices themselves, auditors examined the supports districts used to implement the practices or what supports districts believed would have been helpful but which they lacked access to. Auditors also asked districts about barriers they faced in either implementing or continuing the practices.

However, we were not able to access data regarding student outcomes from the K-12 public education system during the pandemic. Washington has some data about the effect of the pandemic on learning, but there are gaps around students' academic progress due to challenges conducting student assessments during the 2020-21 school year. Lacking access to that data limited the scope of the audit, and means that the success of practices described in this report is based on qualitative rather than quantitative data.

Methodology

We obtained the evidence used to support the findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this audit report during our fieldwork period (February 2023 through June 2023), with some additional follow-up work afterward. We have summarized the work we performed to address each of the audit objectives below.

> **Objective 1: How have schools innovated in response to needing to teach outside a traditional learning environment?**
>
> **Objective 2: How can schools incorporate these new modes of learning?**

To address these objectives, we began by identifying promising practices related to remote learning using an internet search. We analyzed the content in 20 articles, then categorized the promising practices into five areas: access, individualized education, student and family engagement, students' social and emotional needs, and training teachers.

Next, we interviewed Washington education associations as well as representatives from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and from each educational service district (ESD) to learn about innovative practices they had encountered at school districts since March 2020. We also asked them to describe any supports that made establishing new practices possible, and any barriers to implementing new practices. We also asked the associations for recommendations on which school districts had implemented innovative practices. We used those recommendations to create a list of 13 school districts to interview, with responses from 11. Additionally, we surveyed Impact Public Schools, a network of four charter schools.

We developed a survey that asked the selected districts to describe their innovative practices, supports they received, barriers they faced, and tips for other educators. We conducted follow-up interviews with some school districts to obtain additional details. We followed up with the ESDs and OSPI to learn their thoughts on barriers that school districts cited and what steps might be necessary to overcome some of those barriers.

From the interviews and survey responses, we compiled a list of innovative practices after applying our criteria for including practices in this report. To be included, each practice had to be new or expanded since the pandemic began and continue to be useful. Using auditor judgment, we scored each of these practices on the scope of its effects and its level of creativity. The practices with the highest scores were included in this report. The team also compiled a list of barriers to implementing new practices.

Evidence limitations include relying heavily on self-reported, qualitative information that could not be corroborated with data. Student outcomes data for the period of the pandemic was incomplete.

Work on internal controls

We did not examine internal control components as part of this audit. We determined that internal control components were not significant to our audit objectives because the audit would not involve any assessments of whether an agency was effectively managing its program, effectively assuring its compliance with applicable laws and regulations, or using reliable information for decision-making purposes.

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– Pat McCarthy, State Auditor

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Office of the Washington State Auditor
Pat McCarthy