

Learning from the Pandemic: An Analysis of Wisconsin Districts' Requests for Hours of Instruction Flexibility

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Context

During the 2020-21 school year, Wisconsin districts applied to the Department of Public Instruction for waivers to respond to the evolving public health pandemic. This analysis, which focuses on districts utilizing Hours of Instruction and Length of School Day flexibilities, was designed to take stock of what was learned during this unusual year and to uncover possible new innovations. In June of 2021, the text of 110 waiver applications was analyzed for key themes. While some districts submitted waivers preemptively in anticipation of a need, others sought flexibility in response to urgent circumstances. As a result, original waiver language may not have reflected the strategies ultimately used. To better understand district experiences, districts were surveyed and interviewed during July of 2021. WMCC also did a brief web scan of innovative ideas from across the country to provide additional context for this analysis. You can find a summary of this scan [here](#).

Waiver Application Trends

Most districts submitting specific waiver requests were in a “rural” or “town” locale; however, when locale was weighted by student enrollment, waiver applications predominantly represented city or suburban locales. Waiver requests came from all twelve CESAs, with no region dominating the submission process. Additionally, 96% of waiver recipients requested flexibility for all grade levels.

Applicant districts noted the use of various learning models, including in-person, virtual, and hybrid approaches. Districts mostly pivoted between these various platforms throughout the year. Applicants described the effort needed for educators and learners to navigate these transitions. For example, early release time was frequently used to accommodate programmatic changes, and 16% of districts mentioned the use of an asynchronous learning day in their week.

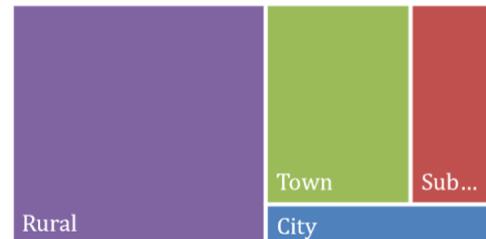
At-a-Glance

110 Districts were approved for Hours of Instruction Waivers for between Sep 11, 2020 and May 13, 2021

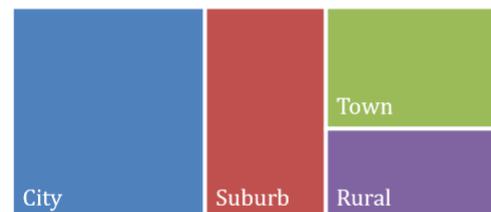
18 Districts also received a Length of School Day Waiver (in addition to their Hours of Instruction waivers)

96% of Waivers applied to all grade levels

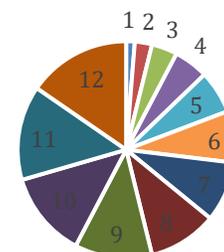
Waiver Locale by # of Districts



Waiver Locale Weighted by Student Enrollment



CESA Affiliation of Approved Waivers



Districts had a variety of reasons for submitting waiver requests, both proactive and reactive. Sometimes, districts requested waivers because of basic health safety efforts, such as a day off for mitigation and cleaning. Often there were pressing programmatic needs, such as extended transitions when switching learning platforms, transportation changes, outreach to virtual learners, and time needed for educators to learn online teaching skills. 30% of districts acknowledged the importance of giving staff professional development for teaching in a virtual or hybrid setting. 20% of districts mentioned needing time to support educators, who went to great lengths to personalize and remediate virtual learning for students. The most common waiver modifications included use of an asynchronous day, virtual/in-person/hybrid instruction, delayed start to the school year, shortened day, and staggered start/end times. The following table includes selected examples from waiver requests from districts seeking flexibility:

Table 1. Waiver Language Excerpts - 2020-2021 School Year

| Outreach/Support to students | PD & teacher time on virtual instruction | Other Purposes |
|--|--|--|
| <p><i>City</i> – “In order to [continue numerous educational programs], we have adjusted the instructional hours at the elementary to include more planning time for staff and more time to do one-on-one connections with learners. We are still concerned with our ability to meet all requirements of each area to the fullest extent both in virtual and in distance learning while still approaching our work from an equity-driven, student-focused lens.”</p> <p><i>Rural</i> – “Virtual instruction has made us very creative in how and when we meet students when and where they are. Many of our teachers work incredible hours, meeting virtually with their students at all hours and on weekends when it is convenient to the student and his or her family. Allowing us flexibility in how we count hours of instruction, allows to focus on the instruction itself and meeting the needs of stakeholders.”</p> | <p><i>Rural</i> – “Our teachers and support staff need specific, ongoing training to better serve students in multiple learning locations, including both in person and virtual. We believe the flexibility will allow us to have greater impact on student learning, even if schedules are changed or hours of instruction potentially fall below the state requirements.”</p> <p><i>Town</i> – “In order to rise to these high standards as educators during this unique time in education, we need to provide time for educators to meet in small groups, work closely with our students who are learning virtually and plan engaging lessons to meet the needs of all students regardless of their chosen learning environment.”</p> | <p><i>Suburb</i> – “The waivers requested assist the district to ensure access and equity for all learners within a multi-tiered system of support. This waiver allows the district to embed deep cleaning days into the calendar, support additional teacher professional development throughout the school year, and provides flexibility for the diverse instructional models the district is offering families. It also provides flexibility with sharing bus drivers with surrounding districts. “</p> <p><i>Town</i> – “Planning has increased the responsibilities for teachers, administrators, and support staff. Specifically, instructional planning for multiple formats, technology professional development, additional cleaning and mitigation responsibilities, and amplified stakeholder communication expectations.”</p> |

In the spring, when we all went into emergency remote teaching, we kept saying we have a “no fouls, swing for the fences” opportunity here. We don't have to do anything the way we always did it right now. So why don't we try new and interesting things? – City District

Survey/Interview Participants

To discover innovative practices, all 110 districts that submitted waiver requests were invited to share their waiver-related experiences in a survey. The perspectives of 28 districts were captured for this inquiry. During July of 2021, 25 districts participated in the online survey and 10 districts participated in online interviews, with seven districts participating in both. Districts were allowed to remain anonymous for the survey, but most districts shared their locale descriptor. A purposive, stratified sample of 10 districts were interviewed regarding the implementation and outcomes of their Hours of Instruction and Length of School Day modifications.

Table 2. Waiver-Receiving District Interview Participants

| Participants | City | Suburb | Town | Rural |
|--------------------------------------|---|------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Survey Only – 18 total | Beloit Madison | Unidentified - 2 | Wonewoc-Union Center | Butternut Potosi Tomah Unidentified - 10 |
| Interview Only – 3 | Neenah | McFarland | Baraboo | |
| Survey and Interview – 7 | Kenosha West Allis West Milwaukee | Hartford J1 | Edgerton | Maple Mishicot Randolph |
| 28 District Participants* | 5 | 4 | 3 | 16 |

*Similar distribution to the overall group of waiver-receiving districts.

Survey/Interview Themes

Districts utilizing Hours of Instruction or Length of School Day waivers indicated numerous shared experiences. Their top priority was to be responsive to the needs of learners, families, and staff while keeping everyone safe from the threat of COVID-19. Their waiver applications focused on helping teachers support learners in the virtual environment. While a few districts indicated they did not see a need to change Hours of Instruction requirements, most districts requested greater flexibility. A summary of districts' requests for flexibility follows, along with a brief review of some other key themes from the survey/interviews (including differentiated learning opportunities, concerns about engagement, demands of virtual instruction, greater use of online platforms, and other positive outcomes).

Requests for Flexibility Summary

Most districts expressed the desire for greater flexibility with Hours of Instruction requirements in the future. Some representative comments follow. One superintendent in an “agrarian” area stated he liked “...the idea of days of instruction over hours and minutes.” He called instructional minutes a “thing of the past,” stating “(that) mold works for particular students...who are we to say that they must be in the seat?” He acknowledged people learn at different speeds and suggested that legislative change would give his district the flexibility to “meet the needs of kids where they're at.” A township-sized district acknowledged teachers feeling a “ball and chain to making sure that they have the instructional minutes, and [instruction should be] more about the experience and the quality of the programming

that we're providing. If we're not doing that in an authentic and meaningful way, the minutes don't really matter." A city-based administrator noted Hours of Instruction requirements are "antiquated . . . we need to look at learners as individuals and not as a whole herd of cattle. Kids learn differently, and what you might learn in 10 minutes, it might take me an hour. For you to sit in your seat for an extra 50 minutes makes no sense." This administrator hopes Wisconsin "gets into the 21st century and recognizes students are individual learners and not the collective industrial-aged learners that they were in in the 1930s."

A few districts described the Hours of Instruction requirement as being satisfactory before the pandemic. One superintendent of a rural district commented, "it works for us. It's just a system you're so used to working within." Another district administrator acknowledged the complexities surrounding Hours of Instruction requirements. She admitted she was not sure whether modifications should be made with these requirements, but acknowledged, "can we allow that time to be flexible, certainly, but if the kids aren't in front of us, how do we make sure they're getting the support they need?"

Several participants appreciated the flexibility already offered from the Department, with one noting, "even pre-COVID DPI had been working on allowing schools to experiment and allowing those asynchronous times to count, and so they didn't have to change much really to let the asynchronous minutes count as well." Overall, districts appreciated the flexibility they were offered, and they hope to continue to utilize flexibility in the future. One participant appreciated the "collaborative opportunity that was allowed through the waiver. It was key in being able to really make things work and figure it out as we went through a year that we didn't know how it was going to work."

Table 3. Selected Survey Responses

| Outreach/Support to students | PD & teacher time on virtual instruction |
|--|--|
| <p>City Interview Response – We would like to see the wavier continue to not have the total seat time. Having the flexibility to design the school day and school week helped free the schedule to adjust to the local context.</p> <p>City Survey Response - Additional guidelines in regards to how to properly calculate instructional minutes in regards to the different learning environments: asynchronous, synchronous, virtual and hybrid. Also, the document used to report instructional minutes per school year is out-of-date and doesn't allow for districts to accurately reflect what is going on in their schools.</p> <p>Rural Survey Response – Finding additional collaboration time for educators is a benefit. Ultimately, this promotes a better learning experience for students by allowing educators the time to purposely plan for individual student and group needs.</p> | <p>Town Survey Response – We will continue to record lessons for students to review later. It became very difficult for staff to manage the online and in-person aspects at the same time throughout the school year.</p> <p>City Interview Response – Removal of requirements allows greater flexibility. It gives us some room to pivot in situations like this.</p> <p>Rural Survey Response – This additional 35 minutes per day allowed our teachers to have an uninterrupted period to give a "second dose" for our virtual learners.</p> <p>City Survey Response – Learners shared how much the check and connect days allowed them time to work and process as well as time to connect with individual teachers.</p> <p>Town Interview Response - I think it opened a lot of good conversation and provided the opportunity for taking a look at how we've always done things and how we could do things.</p> |

Other Key Themes

DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: Many districts developed systems allowing educators to provide varying degrees of support to learners. That flexibility was utilized during early release times and asynchronous days. These instructional “spaces” provided time for one-on-one remediation, homework support, and advanced learning opportunities. In addition, districts are now looking for cross-school and cross-district collaborations around world languages and other curricular areas. Districts tried to keep the focus on their mission and goals as a district, with one participant noting changes in Hours of Instruction forced them to ask tough questions such as, “how do we honor individual learning needs? How do we honor that diversity and make all kids successful?” A handful of districts also indicated achievement scores were steady, despite having only four days of synchronous learning. They attributed this steadiness to the time staff spent planning for targeted and differentiated instruction.

CONCERNS ABOUT ENGAGEMENT: There was widespread concern about requiring the customary number of minutes for learners in an online environment. One district leader reflected on the difficulty of covering content standards in limited time frame, “to get a full day's worth of material and content standards into half a day, we had to be pretty aggressive with where we chose to focus our time.”

DEMANDS OF VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION: Most districts reported that, when educators felt overwhelmed, it resulted from teaching simultaneously in-person and online. One suburban administrator noted, “teachers really struggled with not doing enough . . . They are conscientious hardworking people who love kids and when they can identify a need in the kid and not meet the need, it weighs on them. That happened in September and it happened in October and November and December, and it just compounded over time.”

GREATER USE OF ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORMS: Districts reported an increased use of online learning systems such as Schoology, Google Classroom, or Seesaw. Smaller districts often reported having little to no use of these systems prior to the pandemic and a subsequent uptake in these systems. Districts intend to keep using these systems and were confident they could avoid closing for inclement weather or other interruptions. Numerous districts will continue to use online platforms for parent-teacher conferences and quick check-ins with staff.

OTHER POSITIVE OUTCOMES: One town district indicated they could “recalibrate their entire system going into next year” because of the change in practices resulting from the pandemic. They found the changes they made “...forced the elementary teams to collaborate across the district.” This administrator admitted her district was not in “too big of a rush to go back to normal” because things weren’t working perfectly before COVID hit. One participant in a suburban district thought waiver modifications allowed her district to look at school in a new way: “...We could actually support and bring families into the educational fold in a way that we never could before. It opened a lot of good conversation.”

*In the midst of the pandemic, you really felt the freedom to throw the bureaucracy out the window and do what you had to do in the best interest of kids.
– Rural superintendent*

Interview Guide

The following questions about Hours of Instruction or Length of School Day during the 2020-21 school year were used in this evaluation. [Participants were notified that information gathered would not be used for monitoring or compliance purposes. Sessions were recorded for transcription purposes.]

1. Please describe the changes your district made regarding **Hours of Instruction** or Length of School Day during the 2020-21 school year?
2. What changes did you make to your **instructional day**? Did you use space differently?
3. How did **learners benefit** from these changes? Families? Staff?
4. What **challenges**, if any, did learners, families, or staff encounter?
5. What results did you think you were going to see from the changes you made, and did you end up seeing those results or other unexpected results?
6. How do you think the **size of your district** may have affected your ability to change your Hours of Instruction or Length of School Day? Were there any other factors that made it easier or more difficult to institute these changes?
7. How do you think these changes reflected the **mission or values** of your school district?
8. From the changes made to Hours of Instruction or Length of School Day, which **programmatic changes would you like to see continued**? How might you grow these programs in the future?
9. What **policies or regulations might be a barrier** to implementing these programmatic changes in the future?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding Hours of Instruction or Length of School Day programming?