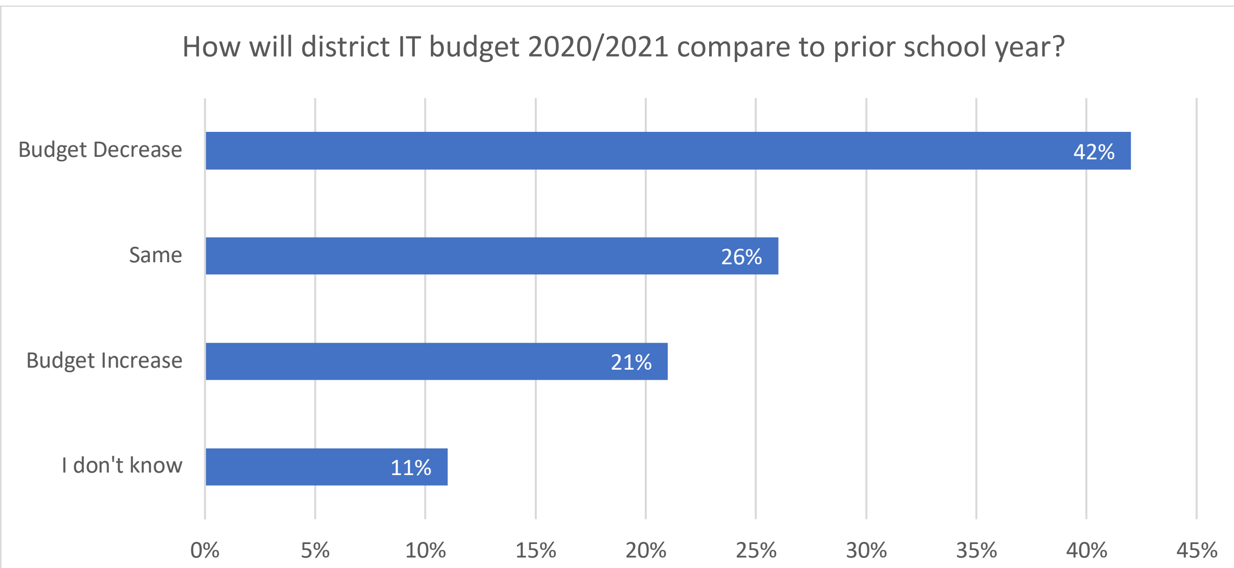
COVID-19 BACK-TO-SCHOOL SURVEY REPORT 2020

To gauge the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, CoSN conducted a short survey of IT Leaders focused on school sytems' needs, expectations and approaches to Fall 2020 Back-to-School. The results provide some insight into what lies ahead and will help to guide CoSN's advocacy work and its development of resources for the education community. Special thanks to our partner Juniper Networks in this effort. Their support helps us to champion the policies required to sustain school districts.

IT BUDGETS

Overall

A decrease in their overall IT budget is expected by 42% of respondents; 26% do not expect any change from the prior year, and 21% anticipate an IT budget increase. More than a tenth of respondents (11%) stated that they just don't know. For those expecting a decrease, one respondent characterized the district's financial circumstance as "dire" and another whose district is cutting major programs, positions, and major course offerings pleaded, "We need financial help ASAP."

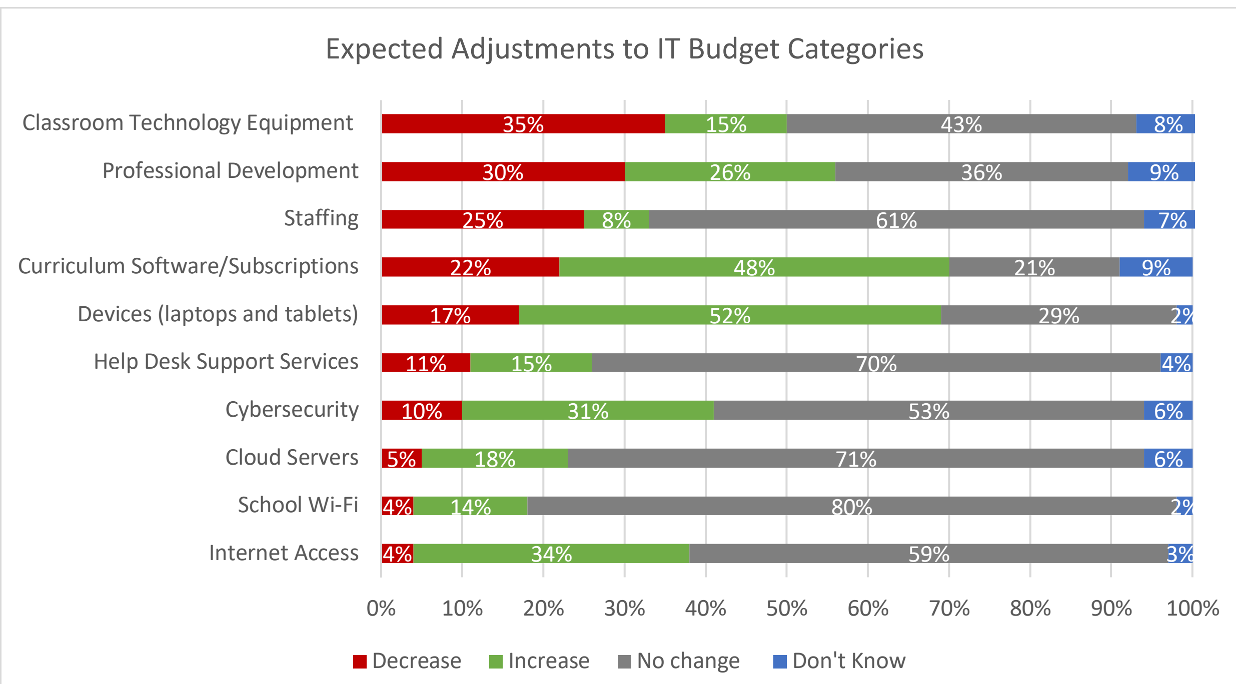


Line Item Assessment

When asked to identify the IT budget areas where they expect adjustments to be made, more than a third (35%) of respondents cited classroom technology equipment (excluding devices)—such as AV equipment—as the most likely to see cuts. A hold on classroom tech spending may make sense in light of the uncertainty of what physical classrooms will need going forward. Professional development (PD) was the next category with the most responses for budget decreases (30%). The reduction in PD spending shows some alignment with the 25% expecting decreases in their staffing budgets. If cuts in PD are related to cuts in staffing, the staffing issue is the larger concern. The good news is that the majority of districts (61%) do not expect any changes to their current IT staffing budget and 7% anticipate an increase.

There are IT areas projected to see increases. The biggest projected increase at 52% is for devices (laptops and tablets), followed by curriculum software/subscriptions at 48%. Rounding off the top three for IT budget increases was Internet access with 34%. Cybersecurity, with 31%, was a close fourth. Budget increases in these categories are not surprising as they relate directly to the demands of the COVID-19 pivot to remote instruction, as well as ongoing online/blended learning.

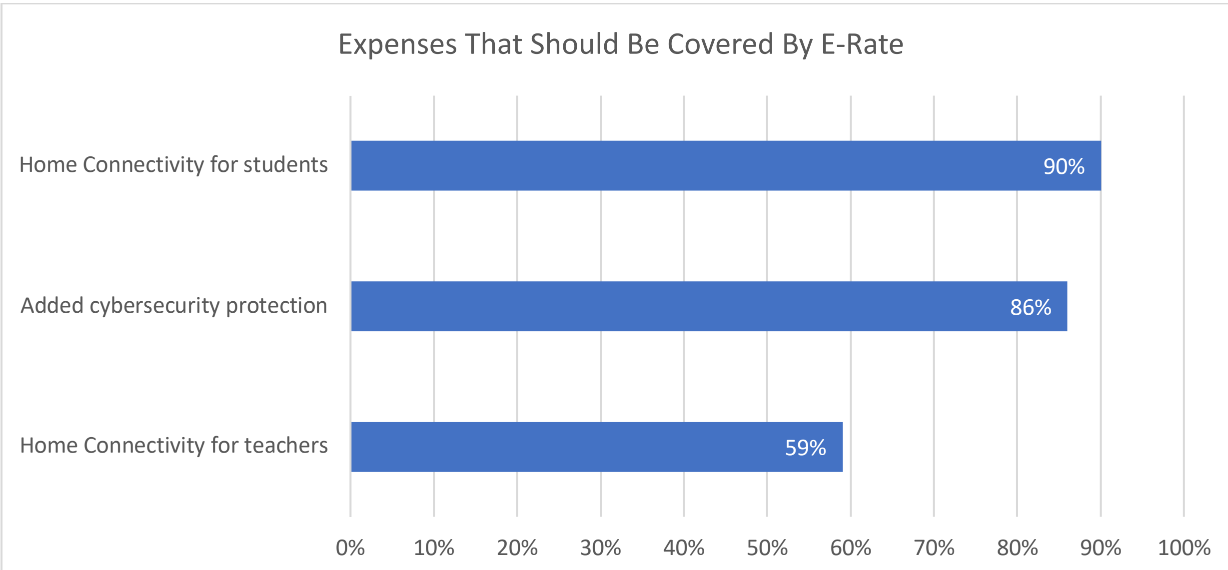
Six of the ten IT budget categories on the survey received majority responses of “no change” expected. Least likely to be hit with funding changes is school Wi-Fi, with 80% of respondents expecting the budget to be the same as the prior school year. Budget for Cloud services and help desk support services were also expected to stay the same for a large majority of respondents, with 71% and 70% respectively. The remaining three IT budget categories where a majority of respondents don’t anticipate changes are staffing (61%), Internet access (59%), and cybersecurity (53%).



FUNDING

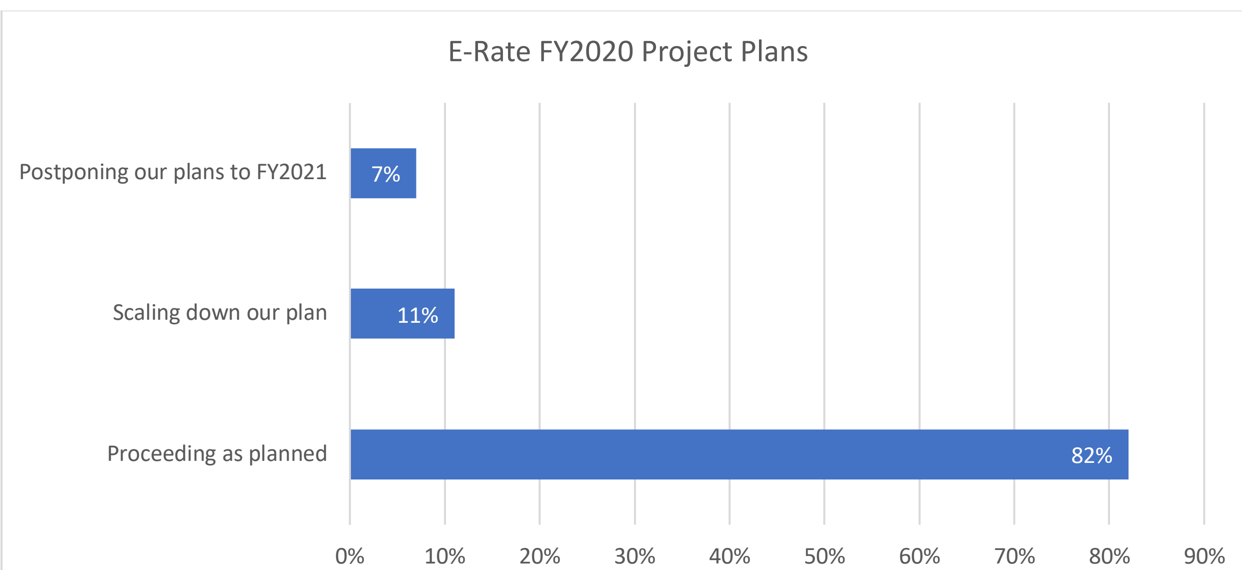
E-Rate Eligible Services

When asked about expanding E-Rate, the overwhelming majority (90%) felt the program should cover home connectivity for students, with a similar majority (86%) saying E-Rate should cover essential cybersecurity protection. A smaller percentage, yet still with a majority response rate of 59%, felt E-Rate should also cover home connectivity for teachers.



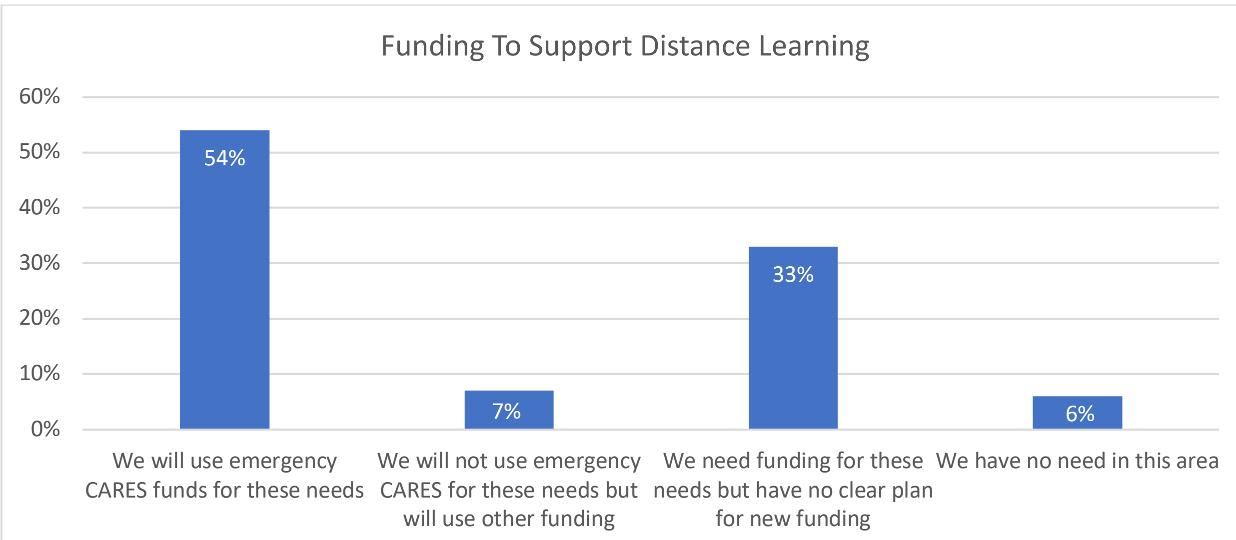
Projecting 2020 E-Rate Funding Requests

Only a small percentage (7%) of respondents are postponing their E-Rate plans to 2021. The vast majority (82%) are proceeding as planned and 11% are scaling down their plans, perhaps due to required local matches of funding.



CARES ACT for Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER)

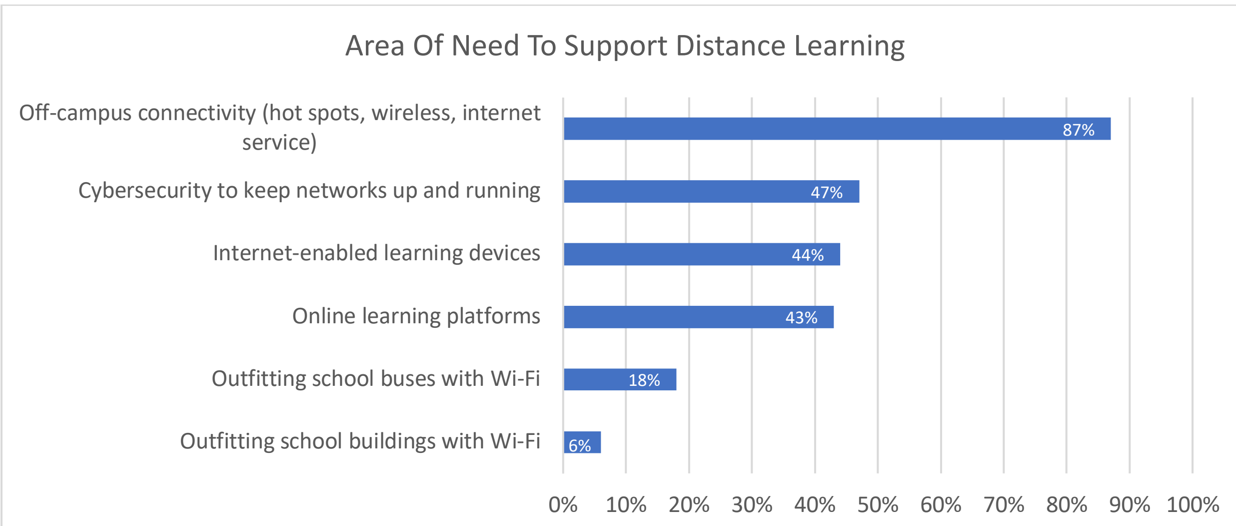
The majority of districts (54%) plan to tap into emergency CARES funds to support distance learning needs. A third (33%) acknowledge their need for financial support but have no clear plan to access new funding. Others (7%) plan to use other funding sources to address these needs and 6% indicated they have no needs in this area. However, CARES funding may not result in any additional funds for some states—as one respondent pointed out, “CARES Act funding is not feasible to [our] school districts because any CARES Act funding we obtain will result in an equal decrease in state aid.”



REMOTE LEARNING

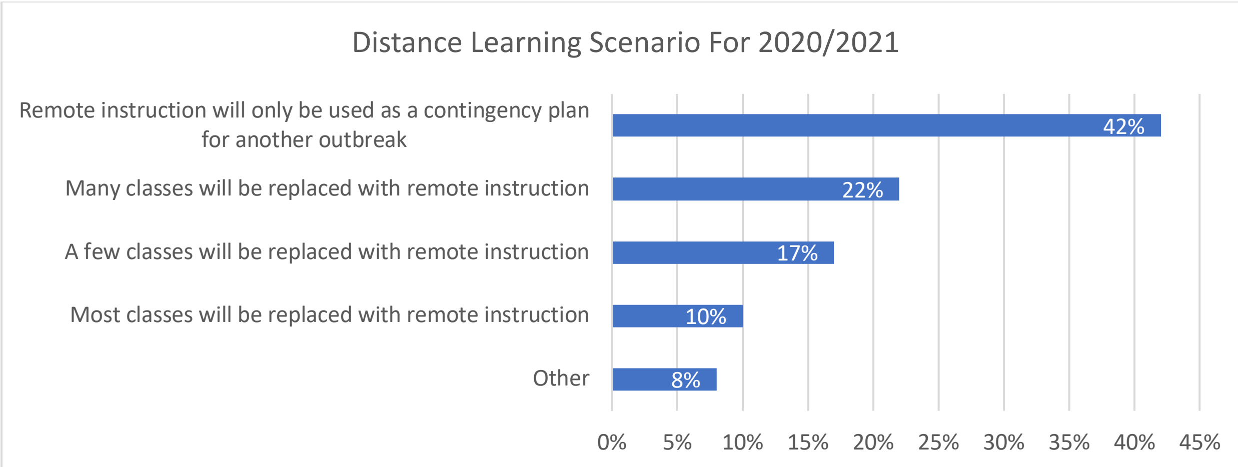
Specific Needs

When asked what they needed to enable remote learning, the vast majority of respondents (87%) cited off-campus connectivity. The next most common response with 47% was cybersecurity to keep networks up and running, followed by internet-enabled devices (44%) and online learning platforms (43%). Lesser needs were outfitting school buses with Wi-Fi (18%) and outfitting school buildings with Wi-Fi (6%).



Replacing onsite instruction

Almost half of respondents (49%) expect remote instruction to replace at least a few classes traditionally taught onsite this fall. Less than quarter (22%) project that many classes will be replaced with remote instruction. Only a tenth (10%) expect most of their classes will convert to remote instruction. For 42% of respondents, remote learning remains their contingency plan for another outbreak. For the 8% who specified “other” scenarios, blended learning was the most common. One respondent highlighted a plan that will be based on grade level: “If we need to continue social distancing, at least grades 7-12 will be fully remote instruction.” Several respondents plan to give parents the choice of distance learning or onsite instruction with social distancing measures.



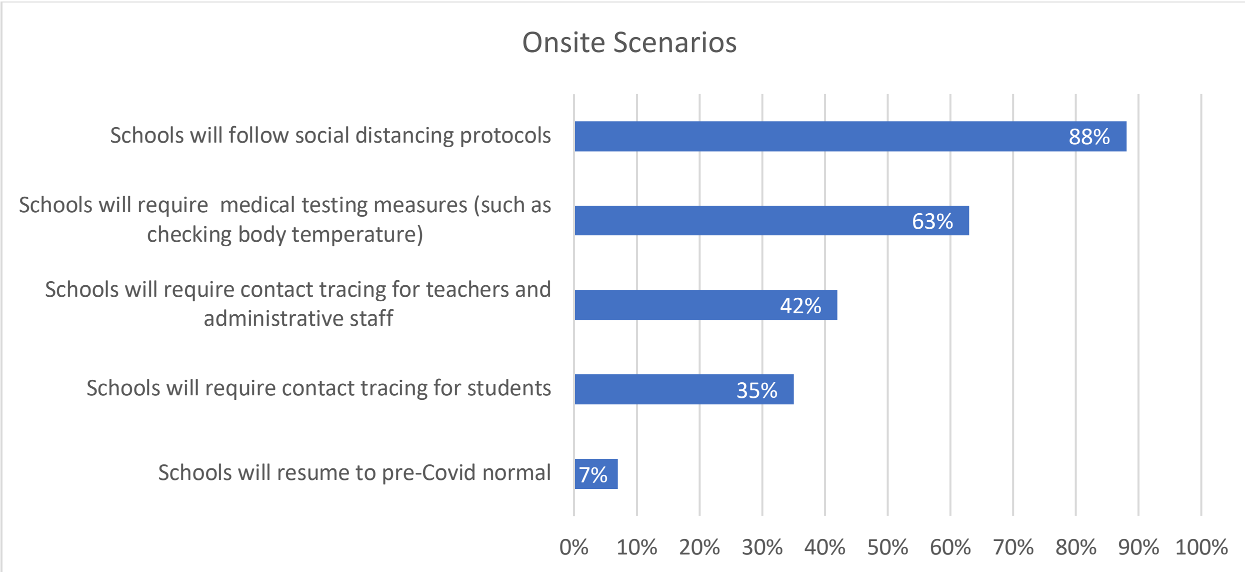
ONSITE SCENARIOS

Few respondents (7%) expect their schools will return to a pre-COVID-19 normal. A majority expect their schools will be following social distancing protocols (88%) and require medical testing measures, such as checking body temperature (63%). More than a third (35%) believe their school will require contact tracing for students and 42% believe contract tracing will be required for teachers and administrative staff. While all these measures are prudent, they will not be easy to implement, as one respondent commented—

> *"Even with that, we will face difficulties in how to ensure that all students and staff follow proper CDC guidelines and protocols."*

Another commented that the pressure to re-open schools is misguided—

> *"I think this is a mistake and will put our community at risk. I would prefer to nail down a solid remote learning plan that includes individual student support plans, but so much of our time will be spent trying to retrofit safety measures around traditional education. I feel that ultimately, we will be forced back to remote learning, and it will not be as effective as it could have been, if we just put all of our energy into that*."



KEY TAKEAWAYS

This survey provides insight into what IT Leaders anticipate for the 2020/2021 school year. Few expect to return to pre- COVID-19 normality in the fall portion of the 2020 school year. They anticipate school environments where students and staff will be required to follow social distancing and undergo medical testing measures. They see classroom instruction being replaced with remote instruction to varying degrees. However, most face a huge barrier to delivering remote instruction— namely, home broadband access. Expressing a sentiment that was also common among conference participants, one respondent declared, “Connectivity has to be seen as a right.” This opinion was reflected in the overwhelming majority’s support of the expansion of E-Rate to cover expenses for home connectivity to enable remote learning. As state governments struggle with the lose-lose scenario of COVID-19-related increased spending and COVID-19-related reduced tax revenues, it is not surprising that education technology leaders see school IT funding as a key concern. Over 40% of respondents expect cuts to their budget; only half as many anticipate an increase. In a few short months, we’ll know what the school year will actually look like. A second wave of COVID-19, for example, will require another pivot. So while these survey results suggest what school may look like for the coming school year, we just don’t know. As one respondent commented regarding his survey answers, “All info are best guesses, but the crystal ball won't boot.”

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey results are from a short survey conducted during CoSN's 2020 national conference (May 19 – May 26) and reflect the feedback from 227 respondents. The respondents are comprised of CoSN conference attendees as well as CoSN members who opted to participate, even if they did not attend the conference. A large plurality (46%) work in suburban districts, with 37% in rural and 17% in urban. The vast majority of respondents (75%) work in districts with less than 10,000 students, with the largest segment (38%) from midsize districts (2,500 – 9,999 students). Large districts (10,000—49,999 students) account for 20% of the respondents with the remaining 5% from super-sized districts—those with enrollments of 50,000 or greater. Forty-one percent (41%) of respondents work in environments where 50% or more of their students receive free/reduced meals. Almost a third (32%) have 25%-49.99% of their students receiving free/reduced meals.

ABOUT CoSN

CoSN is the premier professional association for school system technology leaders and educational leaders to leverage technology to realize engaging learning environments. Visit cosn.org or email membership@cosn.org to find out more about CoSN's focus areas, annual conference and events, advocacy and policy, membership, and the CETL™ certification exam.

ABOUT JUNIPER NETWORKS

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This survey report was authored by Paula Maylahn, a CoSN project director and education industry consultant with thirty-five years' experience across the K-20 spectrum.