

JULY 2021

ISSUE
BRIEF

UPDATE TO FEBRUARY 2021'S

PLUGGED IN REPORT

PLUGGED IN: CHALLENGE NORMAL

Innovating, Learning and Adapting
for Student Success During COVID-19

ABOUT RISE

The Connecticut RISE Network (RISE) is a Connecticut-based non-profit organization with a mission to empower educators to achieve breakthrough results, helping all students realize and achieve their full potential. Leveraging its innovative partnership model, RISE facilitates networks for school improvement by bringing together exceptional educators working in different contexts to advance shared goals. By empowering school communities to improve, we invest in a cycle of lasting and scalable impact.

RISE districts and schools commit to sharing resources and expertise, pursuing innovative solutions, strengthening school and district systems, and empowering educators and leaders through continuous improvement. Currently, RISE represents a multi-year partnership between eight school districts across Connecticut, serving 13,000 students across nine high schools to support educators striving to ensure every RISE high school student graduates college and career ready.

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Introduction



The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed how school communities – students, families, and educators alike – approached education and forced educators everywhere to reimagine how to support student success. Throughout our state, we’ve seen examples of how, when faced with unprecedented circumstances, school communities responded by piloting new and innovative ways to maintain engagement and keep students on-track to achieve their high school and postsecondary goals.

In *Plugged In: Examining COVID-19 Enrollment Trends and Learning Outcomes*, the Connecticut RISE Network (RISE) explored new challenges presented by remote and hybrid learning and revealed that nearly half the students enrolled in remote learning in RISE high schools were off-track to promote to the next grade level. In response, we offered recommendations to encourage school communities to work together to pursue creative ideas to help all students realize and achieve their full potential.

We watched as educators throughout the RISE Network pivoted from the first half of the year to meet the students where they were. Most importantly, they responded to how they were learning. As we wrap up the 2020-21 school year, we are excited to share bright spots from across the RISE Network. Educators from our 9-school network pursued recommendations from the original report, resulting in countless success stories in the face of unpredictable circumstances. Each innovative practice we’ve spotlighted, from college access collaboration between Stamford and Norwalk to Manchester High School’s Grade 9 Educator “Strategy Swaps,” also serves as a promising practice to learn from and replicate as we transition back to school next fall.

For the first *Plugged In* report, we leveraged the RISE Network community to understand early enrollment and performance data and survey families about their experience, informing recommendations to help schools statewide make midyear adjustments. In this report, we revisit those recommendations to spotlight school creativity and ingenuity and lift up successful practices to help school communities chart a path forward.

TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Remote Learning refers to fully virtual instruction. Students do not spend any instructional time in the school building.

Hybrid Learning refers to partially in-person and partially virtual instruction. Students spend part of their instructional time in the school building.

On-Track Status refers to whether a student earns enough credits to promote to the next grade level on time. A student is considered “on-track” if they are passing enough classes to qualify for on-time promotion.



We acknowledge that stakeholders across the state and country are eager to understand the full effects of the pandemic on student outcomes during the 2020-21 school year. As a results-driven nonprofit and network of schools, we also want to understand the data from this past year to target improvements moving forward. However, the data remain quite fluid. Most schools around the state have increased their summer programming and credit recovery opportunities for students, which directly aligns with our recommendation to give students second chances and multiple opportunities to demonstrate success. We will continue to monitor the data this summer and will have a better understanding of year-end outcomes later this summer; drawing conclusions now would be premature.

As many schools across the state reopened this spring and public health conditions improved, we wanted to understand if remote and hybrid enrollment trends were changing. When we went back to look at how enrollment patterns had changed from when we first looked at the remote and hybrid learning enrollment data in the first quarter of the 2020-21 school year to the start of the final quarter of this school year this spring, we were surprised to see that despite the steps schools and districts had taken to prepare schools for greater reopening, on average, we did not see much change in the total percentage of students enrolled in remote learning across our network. We saw a one percentage point decrease in the number of remote students network-wide. It is important to note that there may have been additional challenges tracking changes in student enrollment status as schools reopened and categories changed again. However, it is clear that addressing the needs of remote learners was still an extremely relevant concern for a large percentage of students, even after “full in-person instruction” resumed this spring.

For six years, RISE has brought together stakeholders across schools and districts to advance shared student outcome goals to amplify our collective impact. We work together to ensure all students experience success as they transition to, through, and beyond high school. With daily life beginning to turn back towards our new normal, we have an opportunity to learn from this year and find ways to transfer that knowledge into the in-person classroom next year and beyond.

We hope the lessons learned and innovative practices contained in this report help school communities forge a path toward a more equitable, effective, and accessible education system for all of Connecticut’s students.

RISE NETWORK CHANGE IN REMOTE LEARNING ENROLLMENT:
FALL 2020 VS. SPRING 2021

	FALL	SPRING
OVERALL		
Fully Remote	37%	36%
Hybrid or In-Person	63%	64%
GRADE 9		
Fully Remote	33%	32%
Hybrid or In-Person	67%	68%
GRADES 10-12		
Fully Remote	38%	38%
Hybrid or In-Person	62%	62%

Improving High School Success through On-Track Achievement



Throughout the RISE Network, educators went to extraordinary lengths to help students stay engaged in school and stay on-track to earn enough credits to promote to the next grade level and graduate on time. While early trends highlighted in the Plugged In report showed troubling declines in student on-track rates, the creative practices spotlighted here demonstrate success in pushing back against those trends to support student learning and success.

RECOMMENDATION



GIVE STUDENTS SECOND CHANCES

Educators support students in persevering through obstacles and setbacks.

SATURDAY, EVENING, AND SPRING BREAK SESSIONS HELP STUDENTS GET BACK ON-TRACK

In response to analyses in the Plugged In report, which found that more students were struggling to stay on-track this year, many schools looked for additional ways to give students second chances to demonstrate mastery of their course material. One popular approach educators adopted was to provide extra support outside of school hours to engage students who were struggling to help them catch up on assignments and complete their classwork. For example, at Maloney and Platt High Schools in Meriden, Grade 9 educators hosted Saturday sessions before the quarter ended to focus on making up missing work and boosting grades. Meriden's Grade 9 "Get it Done" sessions were eventually scaled up to include "Making the Grade" and "Saturday Blitz" sessions for students in Grades 10-12. At Westhill High School in Stamford and Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, On-Track Coordinators (OTCs) offered sessions for students to come into the school building for additional support during the spring break holidays in March and April.



To make sure these efforts were targeting students who could benefit the most, Manchester High School and East Hartford High School chose to focus their after-hours sessions on their “almost on-track” Grade 9 students who needed to pass just one or two more courses to be on-track to earn enough credits to promote on time to Grade 10.

“I think I always knew how important social interaction and that face-to-face was. Fortunately, our school opened where our remote students could come after school. Just seeing the difference in their response and their ability to come into the building and interact with their peers and teachers, I saw from a social perspective how it translates to an increase in academic performance. I think creating spaces and opportunities for students to engage in a community correlated to performing well.”

KAITLYN KENNEDY, ON-TRACK COORDINATOR, MANCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL

These in-person, after-hours opportunities to meet with educators and receive targeted one-on-one support were particularly important opportunities for remote learners, who may not have been comfortable entering a full building during regular school hours or who had family and work conflicts that prevented them from attending in-person school. At East Hartford High School, for example, 60% of students who registered for Saturday sessions were remote learners. For these reasons and more, seven out of ten RISE partner schools chose to offer some form of after-hours support.

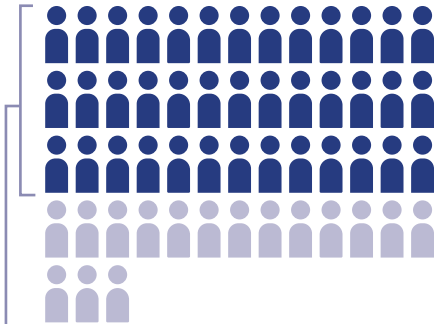
NAUGATUCK HIGH SCHOOL’S “RESET PROGRAM” ENSURES NO STUDENT IS LEFT BEHIND

In a year when increasing course failure rates threatened to leave many students behind, it was important to not give up on students and adapt to meet their unique needs. Naugatuck High School (NHS) considered how best to re-engage students with a significant number of failing course grades. At NHS, students who were projected to receive nearly zero credits after the first semester were placed into a reset program. All students in the program were brought in for full-time in-person instruction, where they became part of a special cohort. A team of Grade 9 teachers rotated into the students’ classroom to provide instruction in each subject area. On-Track Coordinators who support a targeted caseload of struggling Grade 9 students also provided mentoring and support to the students through morning meetings.

“One of the things that worked well was accessing students in a variety of different ways and looking at grading differently with this group. Allowing a little bit of freedom in how they presented their learning went a long way. By being flexible, talking to students, and being empathetic, we were able to get the students in a much better situation than they were before going into next year.”

BRIAN MARIANO, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL, NAUGATUCK HIGH SCHOOL

PROMISING DATA



71%
of the 55 students from Maloney and Platt high schools that attended Saturday sessions in Quarter 2 went from being off-track to on-track.

PROMISING DATA

By Quarter 3, 72% of students in Naugatuck’s “Reset Program” improved their on-track status from earning 0-3 credits to earning 4-5 credits.

RECOMMENDATION



MAKE IT PERSONAL

Educators take new measures to ensure students receive personalized attention that addresses individual student needs.

PERSONALIZED PRINCIPAL AND EDUCATOR OUTREACH PROMOTE STUDENT AGENCY AND RESPOND TO STUDENT NEEDS

With some students never entering the school building this year, school communities risked students falling out of touch with educators and administrators. Personalized methods of communication helped school administrators stay connected to students across remote and hybrid learning models. Six out of ten of RISE partner schools sent personalized emails from administrators in which students were either congratulated for being on-track or encouraged to push themselves over the finish line by the end of the quarter. Although these emails were automated, student responses went directly to the administrators, allowing for open dialogue between students and school leadership. East Hartford High School’s principal, Matt Ryan, was heartened to see how many students responded to emails positively with messages of thanks. In Hartford, automated emails were also used by the Grade 9 Assistant Principal, Vacianna Farquharson, to ensure teachers were aware of which of their students were on the cusp of passing their courses so that they could provide students with extra support and resources.

For Manchester High School, the best way to stay connected to students was to ask them about how they would like to be engaged with school. By conducting a survey to learn more about students’ engagement with virtual classes, Grade 9 educators were able to answer key questions, such as whether or not students knew how to log in to their accounts, which classes were the most difficult for them, and what additional support they needed in their virtual learning. The survey helped to pinpoint where students most needed assistance and more targeted support. Educators identified organization and time management as priorities and set out to determine what steps teachers and students could take in these areas. Using Grade 9 team meetings, educators brainstormed ideas and conducted “strategy swaps,” sharing tips and resources for supporting time management, conducting family outreach, promoting attendance, and using Google Classroom.



Student voice can be a driving factor for students to take ownership in their education and provide a student perspective that helps us collaborate with teachers by providing insight on how to tailor instruction and interventions to support student needs.

MARKEITH CIRINNA, ON-TRACK COORDINATOR, MANCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL



PROMISING DATA

By assigning the student engagement survey during social studies class, Manchester High School was able to receive survey responses from 71% of their Grade 9 students.

RECOMMENDATION



ADDRESS STUDENTS’ SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS.

Educators understand and respond to students’ unique experiences and social and emotional development.

HARTFORD PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL PRIORITIZES STUDENT WELLNESS FOR REMOTE LEARNERS

This year, more than ever, educators across the RISE Network created routines to not only check in on students’ academic performance but also to support students’ holistic social and emotional development. At Hartford Public High School, On-Track Coordinators (OTCs) teamed up with family engagement specialists and school social workers to conduct weekly “Wellness Checks” for students with eight or more absences. They also reached out to students via text message on the same days every week, just to show that they were thinking of them and checking in. By making sure these touchpoints occurred at regular intervals and focusing their attention on how the student was doing personally before talking about grades, OTCs became a consistent force in students’ lives, even if they were engaging with school remotely.

GRADE 9 TEAMS COLLABORATE TO PROVIDE INNOVATIVE PERSONALIZED OUTREACH

Since before the pandemic, RISE schools have been working to implement teaming structures that help freshmen make a smoother transition to high school. By creating teams of Grade 9 teachers that are all assigned a common group of students, teachers can meet regularly to share insights and discuss students’ experiences across subject areas. Grade 9 teaming structures became uniquely important (yet also more challenges) this year, as teachers took innovative approaches to making connections with students across different remote, hybrid and in-person learning models.

For example, realizing that they needed to better understand students’ lived experiences during the pandemic, Grade 9 team teachers at Westhill High School in Stamford held quarterly focus groups with five to ten students to understand the unique challenges they faced so educators could better tailor interventions and programs to meet their needs. These focus groups allowed teachers to ensure they were planning with specific student concerns in mind, keeping students at the forefront of their practice.

This student-centered, collaborative approach led educators to discover that some hybrid students struggled to maintain a sense of structure and accountability on their at-home days. Grade 9 On-Track Coordinators identified students on their caseloads who needed some additional motivation. They scheduled a virtual lunch in the middle of one of their at-home days with their principal, Mike Rinaldi, and arranged for lunch to be delivered to the students’ homes for them to eat while they chatted. The feedback from students was extremely positive, and it was even featured on the school’s Instagram page!

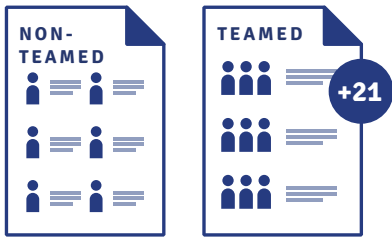


PROMISING DATA

In Quarter 1, only 53% of the fully remote On-Track Coordinator 56 student caseload at Hartford Public High School were on-track. By the end of Quarter 3, 77% of them were on-track.



PROMISING DATA



At Westhill, Freshmen teams had On-Track rates that were, on average, 21 percentage points higher than the On-Track rate for non-teamed students.

Supporting Postsecondary Success through College and Career Access



RISE is committed to ensuring all students identify and pursue a postsecondary plan, and the COVID-19 pandemic created additional urgency in ensuring that all students had the support and resources they needed to achieve their goals for college and career success. At a time when national and state-wide trends pointed to dropping college enrollment and an uncertain job market for young people, educators stepped in to ensure all students could access postsecondary opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION



MEET STUDENTS AND FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE.

Educators go beyond traditional ways of connecting with students and families to meet them where they are.

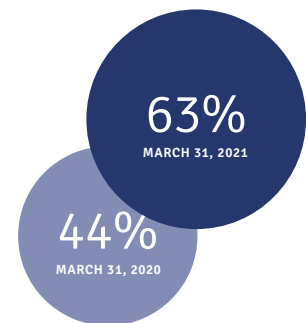
FAFSA TASK FORCES PROVIDE TARGETED SUPPORT TO HELP STUDENTS AND FAMILIES NAVIGATE FINANCIAL AID

Statewide and national trend data showed FAFSA completion rates declined precipitously amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that fewer students and families are applying for free financial aid for higher education. In fact, financial aid data from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) showed that as of December 2020, FAFSA completion rates were down 16% compared to the same time last year. When students who otherwise are planning to enroll in postsecondary education do not submit the FAFSA, they're leaving valuable resources on the table that could make the difference in their ability to access higher education. To address this troubling trend, the RISE Network partnered with the Connecticut State Department of Education on the design and launch of the Connecticut FAFSA Challenge.

As part of Connecticut's FAFSA Challenge, Hartford Public High School and Platt High School created FAFSA task forces to ensure students who were interested in college received access to financial assistance. In Hartford, senior seminar teachers held after school and Saturday sessions where students could drop in and receive support to complete the FAFSA. At Platt, the College and Career Coordinators and school counselors collaborate with teachers and administrators to provide targeted support for a single group of students over a 10-week period. They built deep relationships with students and families to support them throughout the financial aid process, providing both in-person and virtual outreach.



PROMISING DATA



As of March 31, 2021, 63% of Platt seniors had completed FAFSA applications compared to 44% at the same time last year. By that point in the school year, 76% of all students who were pursuing higher education had completed their FAFSA.

The Platt Task Force was able to draw on each educator's unique backgrounds and expertise. For example, Angela Frago is an English Language Teacher who is bilingual in Spanish and leverages this skill to enrich her interactions with the coaches, families and the students. "Being part of this task force was extremely important to me because, as a Spanish speaker, I was able to ensure that my Spanish-speaking families have the same equitable access to a FAFSA coach – someone that could explain and support them through the process in their native language," she said. "Being this accessible person has made all the difference for most of my students and families, but it has also been an extremely rewarding experience for me."

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE NIGHT BRINGS THE CAMPUS TO THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

This year, with limited opportunities to visit campuses directly to get information about college options, it was even more essential for schools to provide students with information to meet their long-term career goals. To support seniors interested in attending community college, RISE high schools in Stamford and Norwalk collaborated to get students information about the application and financial aid process, McMahon High School (Norwalk) and Westhill High School (Stamford) reached an agreement: the principal of the school with the highest attendance at the "NCC Live!" event would have to wear the other school's gear for one day! This friendly competition between schools helped 20 McMahon seniors and 38 Westhill seniors attend a virtual information session about Norwalk Community College.

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"The first thing we were affected by (during the pandemic) was the college visits. We normally have representatives come in from September to December and they sit with students. This year we could not do that. We said 'we are going to do virtual visits.' That ended up working a lot better. We usually have about 100 visits each year and this year we had 150 to 175."

TOM STEPKOSKI, WESTHILL HIGH SCHOOL, SCHOOL COUNSELOR

MIDDLETOWN CCR-FOCUSED PORCH VISITS TAKE POSTSECONDARY PLANNING DIRECTLY TO STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Given that post-secondary planning is such an individualized process, it's vitally important to have 1:1 conversations with students about it. This was a challenge for students who were attending school remotely. After the success of Middletown's Grade 9 porch visits, Middletown staff decided to adapt this strategy with a new focus on college and career support. Not only did this allow them to bring vital resources to students about the postsecondary pathways that were available to them, it also allowed parents and families to connect with school staff about their students' future aspirations and become partners in the planning process.

SENIOR SIGNING DAYS CELEBRATE THE CLASS OF 2021

Over the past few years, senior signing day celebrations have become traditions across the RISE Network. On signing day, seniors proudly walk across their high school stages -- in front of teachers, family, and friends -- to reveal their plans to enroll in a particular college, enlist in the military, join the workforce, or begin a trade/technical program. In most schools, this celebration has become as important (if not more anticipated!) than the graduation ceremony itself. This supports our goal of building a postsecondary culture and ensuring all students graduate with a meaningful and personalized plan.

Students and educators alike were eager to continue this tradition this year. Students organized campaigns to share their plans on social media, and schools adapted the in-person events to continue the valued tradition. Events at Platt High School (Meriden) and Middletown High School recently caught the attention of local media.



PROMISING DATA



In April, when counselors at Westhill High School usually start supporting community college applications, 44% of students interested in 2-year colleges had already applied!



PROMISING DATA

Out of the 25 seniors who had a CCR-focused porch visit, 16 (64%) completed their community college application, signed with a recruiter, or completed their application to trade school.

Conclusion



As we wrap up the 2020-21 school year and look ahead to 2021-22, many recent education conversations and news articles have focused on the issue of **learning loss**. In other words, we're taking time to assess the damage in the wake of the pandemic. How far behind are students in their learning? What parts of the curriculum did we forgo? What are the skill and content gaps? Which subgroup gaps are emerging or widening? These are very real and important questions that need to be understood, and the RISE Network hopes to support school communities to engage in these conversations moving forward. Undoubtedly, students experienced an imperfect school year, and we must pinpoint and address emerging gaps -- in learning, mental health, social and emotional development, postsecondary access, racial and subgroup equity, and education resourcing. Many of these gaps existed long before the pandemic, and COVID-19 shined a light on systemic issues in Connecticut and beyond that require our collective attention and action.

However, this report underscores how 2020-21 is not simply a year of learning loss. In fact, we believe this past year ushered in tremendous **learning gains**. Consider our students. Students persevered and developed tremendous 21st century technology, time management, and organizational skills, and students learned how to navigate change and challenges. Consider the adults in our school communities. Teachers mastered new virtual instructional formats and tools, counselors developed new methods to connect with their students and families, and families and educators forged deeper partnerships in support of student success. And consider our education systems. Schools, particularly in underserved communities, now have greater access to technology and internet connectivity than ever before.

As we approach the back-to-school season, educators, families, and students are preparing for the new normal. Together they are challenging our assumptions about what education could and should be, based on what they've experienced and learned over the past year. The pandemic showed how school communities can come together to innovate, flex, and adapt when the circumstances demand it, and the question now is how we sustain this momentum and push our systems to better serve all students.

