



*Connecticut's*

*COVID-Era*

*Classrooms:*

*The Great Divide*

*by Sarah McKinnis*

COLETTE WARD, A JUNIOR at Fairfield Ludlowe High School, wakes up for online classes on Mondays, Tuesdays, and some Wednesdays and attends her Google Meets from her bed—if her teachers decide to have them. Some instead assign a worksheet or other independent assignment for the remote students to finish on their own time. “If I’m feeling put together I’ll sit at my desk,” she said, “It’s really hard to focus and actually be productive [at home].” She does have in-home WiFi, explaining, “I kind of live in a dead zone so sometimes the signal is weak or completely cuts out, which is hard. [But] I’m lucky I have WiFi, especially during these times.”

Colette is part of Ludlowe’s “Cohort B,” so on Thursdays and Fridays, she goes to classes in person. At Ludlowe High, one of the two public high schools in suburban Fairfield, Connecticut, the hallways have been split in half with blue tape and stickers directing students to walk on the right side at all times. Colette describes how single desks, spaced six feet apart, have replaced cafeteria tables. Mondays and Tuesdays, “Cohort A” receives lessons in person, and Wednesdays, the cohorts alternate between in person and at home.

According to Colette and another Fairfield Ludlowe High School (FLHS) junior, Andrew, FLHS’s Headmaster, Gregory Hatzis, announced that all cases of COVID-19 affecting students have been from out-of-school transmission, though Colette admits she still worries about catching the virus from being in school. Overall, Colette thinks Ludlowe has done a good job of following all precautions, but that not all students have the same careful attitude outside of school.

Since school began for Fairfield Public School students on September 8th, the district of 9,415 students<sup>1</sup> has seen 421 positive student cases, including 410 recovered and 11 active cases as of March 5th.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Fairfield Public Schools Enrollment.” Fairfield Public Schools, March 1, 2021, Connecticut. [resources.finalsite.net/images/v1612971198/fairfieldschoolsorg/g3lvjtzuqkqvypskdm0/February12021enrollment-count.pdf](https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1612971198/fairfieldschoolsorg/g3lvjtzuqkqvypskdm0/February12021enrollment-count.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “COVID-19 Dashboard.” Fairfield Public Schools, March 5, 2021, Fairfield, Connecticut. [www.fairfield-schools.org/](http://www.fairfield-schools.org/)

### *State Consensus*

Across Fairfield County, reopening plans have been tailored to each of the 22 public school district’s needs. Superintendents from across the state, along with other education sector representatives and the Commissioner of Education, did not endorse a uniform county-wide or statewide reopening plan. Instead, they released basic statewide requirements and guidance for reopening, along with addendums to that plan, modified as more information came in.

The reasoning behind this flexibility? Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont rejected the statewide plan put together by education and public health experts that had all children from preschool through elementary coming to school full time, every day, using the high school and middle school facilities. “[Lamont] didn’t like the plan,” Frances Rabinowitz, the Executive Director at the Connecticut Association for Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), explains, because

“If we were sharing our resources, if we were sharing the burden...I think it would force us to reckon with a lot of the inequities we’ve pushed aside.”

students in grades 7 through 12 would be remote, and the governor worried that they would be “disengaged.” Despite Rabinowitz’s initial advocacy for the statewide plan—which she supported because of research showing remote learning was most detrimental to young children and children with disabilities—Rabinowitz says that she has since “changed three hundred and sixty degrees.” She added, “Even though it’s been much more cumbersome the way that it has turned out, with every district making their own decision, [it] is probably better, because local context is very different.” Indeed, case levels across the state have fluctuated at different times, forcing different districts to temporarily go all-remote.

John Whaley, an English teacher at Fairfield Warde High School, appreciates the flexibility the plan provides, but suggests that logistically, things would be easier for teachers and parents if plans were done by region. A complete overhaul of the current town-by-town districting system in favor of school regionalization has actually been proposed in the past as a solution to the inequalities between town and city-based school districts. Especially during this health crisis, regionalization offers an appealing remedy for disparities in resources. Whaley explained, “If we were sharing our resources, if we were sharing the burden, then this turns into a much more communal way in which we can solve these problems, and I think it would force us to...reckon with a lot of the inequities we’ve pushed aside.”

The differences in reopening plans are clearly not the only differences among Fairfield County districts. Seven students’ accounts of their experiences reflect significant disparities in resources,

funding, and life circumstances which have existed long before the pandemic.

### *Cross-District Differences*

Five miles away from Fairfield, many students in Bridgeport, Connecticut, another city in Fairfield County, struggle with drastically different resources available to them for remote learning. Dajonique Small is a senior at Central High School in Bridgeport, and though she is an only child with her own bedroom in which to do schoolwork, she explains challenges that some of her peers face, “It’s been really hard,” she said. “School is a place that a lot of kids look forward to to get out of their home, or to even just get a meal... Especially if you come from a home that has so many people in it, and

it's noisy and there are three other kids in school, it is really overwhelming.”

Whereas some students have room to spread out from other siblings and parents who are working from home, those in lower income households often don't have the proper space to focus on schoolwork.

Bridgeport falls second to last in Fairfield County in terms of per-pupil expenditure, at \$14,419.<sup>3</sup> The average at public schools in Fairfield County is \$19,168. This can be attributed to the fact that 55.3% of public school funding in Connecticut comes from local property taxes.<sup>4</sup> Bridgeport does not generate nearly as much revenue from property taxes because property values are comparatively low.

Bridgeport is also a lot poorer than Fairfield. In the 2019–2020 school year, 71.5% of its students were eligible for free or reduced price meals,<sup>5</sup> and State Department of Education data from 2012–2013 reported that 100% of Bridgeport Schools students were from low-income families.<sup>6</sup>

Although the schools in the state and county are obviously not legally segregated, statistics for the 2018–2019 school year showed that 33.8% of Bridgeport Schools' students were Black or African American and 48.4% identified as Hispanic or Latino of any race. Only 13.3% of the student body was white.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “Spending Per Student.” School and State Finance Project, Accessed December 3, 2020. [ctschoofinance.org/spending/per-student](https://ctschoofinance.org/spending/per-student).

<sup>4</sup> Skinner, Rebecca R. “State and Local Financing of Public Schools.” Congressional Research Service, August 26, 2019. [www.everycrsreport.com/files/20190826\\_R45827\\_7a8d531e7ac1e7fabafefb-87cdfd1b3d03ced49.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20190826_R45827_7a8d531e7ac1e7fabafefb-87cdfd1b3d03ced49.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> “Bridgeport School District: Connecticut Report Cards.” EdSight, Accessed December 3, 2020. [edsight.ct.gov/SASStoredProcess/guest?\\_program=CT-DOE/EdSight/Release/Reporting/Public/Reports/StoredProcesses/ConnecticutReportCard&district=Bridgeport+School+District&school=+%select=Submit](https://edsight.ct.gov/SASStoredProcess/guest?_program=CT-DOE/EdSight/Release/Reporting/Public/Reports/StoredProcesses/ConnecticutReportCard&district=Bridgeport+School+District&school=+%select=Submit).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, Jacqueline Rabe and Jake Kara. “The state of CT's public schools in charts.” CT Mirror. The Connecticut News Project, September 28, 2017. [ctmirror.org/2017/09/28/the-state-of-cts-public-schools-in-charts/](https://ctmirror.org/2017/09/28/the-state-of-cts-public-schools-in-charts/)

<sup>7</sup> “District Profile and Performance Report For School Year 2018-19: Bridgeport School District.” Connecticut State Department of Education, November 2020. [edsight.ct.gov/Output/District/HighSchool/0150011\\_201819.pdf](https://edsight.ct.gov/Output/District/HighSchool/0150011_201819.pdf).

Next door in Fairfield, 75.6% of Fairfield Schools' student body was white. Only 2.3% were Black or African American and 11.5% identified as Hispanic or Latino of any race.<sup>8</sup>

As with so many other public policy areas, the COVID-19 pandemic is further exposing and amplifying disparities in public education. “[The pandemic] has pointed out the lack of connectivity,” said Rabinowitz, the CAPSS Executive Director, adding, “It has pointed out the... lack thereof of electronic devices... In Fairfield, Westport, or Greenwich, you wouldn't think

“The federal government needs to be involved in that, too. There's no reason why anyone should not be connected to the Internet.”

of three siblings having to use an iPhone to do their school work. That is the case in some places in the cities, in Bridgeport for example.”

Bridgeport Schools Superintendent Michael Testani explained that in the spring of 2020, “devices were a huge challenge for us.” Going into the fall, the district secured funding through the state, city, and the CARES Act to buy devices for all students. BPS also partnered with the state and the cable television company Altice to provide free WiFi to families without internet connectivity. “I think we've done a pretty good job with that,” Testani added. “But some of the feedback we get is that the free internet... isn't always as reliable or as high speed as needed for running Microsoft Teams, so those are still some challenges that our kids face that the suburban kids with high speed internet in their homes don't have to deal with.”

Indeed, in Fairfield, Connecticut, all high school students had already been given Chromebooks at the start of the 2019-2020 school year, prior to COVID-19, to improve connectivity

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

and use of online resources. The devices are even more crucial now. In Westport, Connecticut, Staples High School senior Jillian Levin said, “most kids will use a personal device,” but that the school has helped get Chromebooks for students who don't have their own.

The situation is the same in other well-funded districts across the county. Greenwich is viewed as a resource-rich district, and though Greenwich Board of Education Chair Peter Bernstein notes that there are students from families who qualify for free or reduced

price lunch—20.5% of students in the 2019–2020 school year—and those who lack access to WiFi or devices, he also explains the robust support that the district has been able to provide. “We've been providing MiFis,” Bernstein explained, “to make sure families have access.” MiFis are mobile WiFi hotspots. Greenwich, where in the 2018–2019 school year the per-pupil expenditure was \$22,370, had already provided all middle and high school students with Chromebooks and kids in Kindergarten through 5th grade with iPads.<sup>9</sup> Bernstein feels lucky that their district was already one-to-one in terms of students and devices and could take advantage of that when COVID-19 hit, noting that a lot of districts—like Bridgeport—weren't as well situated.

Bridgeport planned to open fully in-person in the fall, and succeeded in doing so in the city's elementary and middle schools, while keeping high schoolers on a hybrid schedule. Like Fairfield, Westport, and Greenwich, the city also offered a parallel all-remote learning track. The hybrid plan split the high

<sup>9</sup> “Spending Per Student.” School and State Finance Project, Accessed December 3, 2020. [ctschoofinance.org/spending/per-student](https://ctschoofinance.org/spending/per-student).

schoolers into cohorts and functioned much like the model adopted by both Fairfield and Westport Public Schools.

However, due to consistently increasing COVID-19 cases in the community, Bridgeport schools transitioned to full remote learning beginning November 23, 2020. Starting January 11, 2021, the district transitioned back to full-time in person learning for PreK, Kindergarten, and classes with less than 14 students in Grades 1 through 8, and a hybrid schedule for all other classes and Grades 9 through 12. Due to low high school attendance in-person, Bridgeport Superintendent Testani wrote to the district on January 29, 2021, offering the option for high school students to attend 4 days a week in person.

### **Health Concerns**

One thing that has been surprisingly a non-issue for most teachers and administrators has been mask wearing. “I’ve never had to tell somebody to put [their mask] back on,” Megan Laney, a Spanish and world culture teacher at Fairfield Ludlowe High School, explained, “It seems like [the students are] being really respectful of the rules.”

“When you’re online... we don’t talk that much, not because we don’t want to, just because it’s kind of awkward.”

The ability to distance students from one another is key for Laney, who said, “I would probably be more nervous [about COVID-19] if we had a full return to school, because right now I can spread them out. I only have, like, 10 to 15 kids instead of 25 or 26, so if we fully reopen... I’d be interested to see if we’re able to stay as safe as we’ve been right now.” Testani, the Bridgeport superintendent, said that in his district, class sizes are closer to 28 or 29 students, though BPS was able to spread students out more because only about 55% of students across the district chose to do in-person learning. All districts have faced rising cases, leading to temporary

shutdowns and changes in plans.

Rabinowitz, the Executive Director at the statewide superintendents association, added that in addition to the physical health and safety, the social-emotional wellbeing of children needs to be of primary concern. To address these issues, education executives worked to get funding from the Dalio Foundation—a CT-based philanthropic organization funded by hedge fund billionaire Ray Dalio that focuses on public education—to underwrite training for educators statewide in social and emotional learning.

However, many school districts have trouble staffing schools with enough mental health professionals. BPS Superintendent Testani explained how he’s seen the staffing levels in the Bridgeport counseling department decline since he started as a school counselor in 1994, due to what he calls “flat funding” coupled with cost increases. During the pandemic, the need for mental health professionals is even greater, Testani said, explaining that “I don’t think right now there’s enough access that kids have to mental health professionals, and we’re

going to really need to address that in the immediate future.”

### **Falling Behind & Looking Ahead**

“I’ve learned literally nothing, but I mean, nobody’s learned anything,” Colette—the junior at Fairfield Ludlowe—said when asked about changes to school since COVID-19 hit. The six other students interviewed echoed her sentiments.

Mikailah Clarke, a senior at Central High School in Bridgeport, explained one challenge of online learning, saying, “I like to participate and I like being engaged. When you’re online... we don’t talk that much, not because we don’t want

to, just because it’s kind of awkward.”

Laney, the teacher at Fairfield Ludlowe, has noticed this with her students who are doing all remote learning and join the class from Google Meets. She also described how teachers have struggled to adjust their courses to online and hybrid learning. “I think people are trying really hard,” she said, “and at our staff meetings, people are breaking down in tears from the exhaustion and the stress of what we’re trying to accomplish given these crazy times.”

Some districts, like Fairfield Public Schools, have continued to administer STAR Math and Reading assessments to measure progress, though these scores are not yet publicly available. The state-wide student assessments are all scheduled for early 2021, so it remains to be seen what the full impact of hybrid and remote learning will be on academic progress in each district.

Recognizing this, Rabinowitz of CAPSS said, “We’re not alone in this, in Connecticut or in the United States. This is a worldwide phenomenon, and... I am concerned. I’m concerned K-12. I don’t think there’s any two ways about it that most students will have lost ground in this.” That’s why she believes in creating comprehensive standards for distance learning, namely to ensure that teachers will be teaching the students every day. There is also a great need for federal funding, she added. Towns and the state have both put money into connectivity, but Rabinowitz said, “The federal government needs to be involved in that, too. There’s no reason why anyone should not be connected to the Internet.” President Biden’s COVID-19 relief proposal calls on Congress to provide \$170 billion in funding for K-12 schools and higher education institutions, some of which could go towards connectivity if the bill passes Congress.<sup>10</sup>

In Connecticut and Fairfield County, it starts with mitigating the effects of

<sup>10</sup> “President Biden Announces American Rescue Plan.” The White House, January 20, 2021. [www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2021/01/20/president-biden-announces-american-rescue-plan/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2021/01/20/president-biden-announces-american-rescue-plan/).

economic disparities. “Families have different needs during this,” Rabinowitz said, “and we have to help them with the actual remote education.” One solution she proposes is creating small pods at churches and community centers so that students can have a focused, supervised environment in which to learn.

A gilded version of that is already being done in wealthy neighborhoods, where parents are hiring a teacher and forming small pods, or hiring tutors for

Greenwich, and Westport, according to Testani. Still, BPS has struggled with in-person attendance among students enrolled fully in-person and hybrid in Bridgeport. Testani reminded parents in his most recent memo to the district that students who do not attend in person classes regularly may be placed on remote learning, after notifying parents. He wrote, “There are many students wanting to attend more in person classes at our elementary schools who are being

denied because of students who only come on occasion.”<sup>11</sup> Connecticut’s ECS (Education Cost Sharing) grant formula is supposed to equalize aid to districts based on need, yet although it has been in existence since the 1989-1990 fiscal year, it has rarely been fully funded. The continued reliance on property taxes and local fundraising does nothing to address the differences between schools in Bridgeport and Norwalk, compared to those in Fairfield, Greenwich, and Westport.

Still, the disadvantages that Bridgeport and other school districts face are not unique to Fairfield County. As Rabinowitz explained, the federal government needs to take comprehensive action to make sure that kids living in disadvantaged districts are not falling behind their peers attending better funded schools. Yet even the resource-rich districts in Fairfield County are facing unprecedented challenges in the midst of the pandemic. Teachers and administrators continue to get creative in their solutions, while hoping that public officials at all levels will ensure that every school has the funding to give each student a high-quality education.

Moreover, the effects of the pandemic will require mitigation even once the disease is gone. As Bridgeport’s Testani put it, “This is probably going to be a 5 to 10 year commitment on the state’s part to really provide us with enough resources to be able not only to address the academic deficiencies, but all the social-emotional needs that our kids are going to [have].” •  
*Sarah McKinnis is a junior in Trumbull College and can be reached at sarah.mckinnis@yale.edu.*

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their kids who feel like they are falling behind in remote learning. Colette describes struggling with the way her physics teacher assigns online work and does not explain much of the content; “I had to get a tutor,” she said. That is not an option for kids whose families cannot afford it, especially during this economic crisis.

The concept of the hybrid model itself works only for families with specific resources. Especially for elementary school students, who have their day split in half—they either go in person in the morning or in the afternoon, and have remote learning for the other half of the day—this model requires parent involvement, or the involvement of another caregiver. Whaley, the Warde High School teacher, explained, “The weird scheduling of the hybrid means that you have to have somebody with a malleable schedule... and many of these especially low-income parents do not have access to childcare that looks like that... because of that, many of these families had to go full remote.” Testani sees this in Bridgeport as well, which helps explain why only 55% of BPS students chose to do hybrid, compared to higher rates of hybrid learners in towns like Fairfield,

denied because of students who only come on occasion.”<sup>11</sup>

The disparities run deep, and the solutions mentioned above are only short-term. Rabinowitz has been active in pushing for more equitable public education funding in Connecticut for years. After working for the past two years with a group of education experts, she and her team plan to bring a comprehensive funding plan for Connecticut public education to the legislature this year. “I’m very, very excited,” she said.

Fairfield County has gained notoriety because of the disparities in public education funding, and Connecticut has faced several lawsuits in the past five years related to the differences in educational quality across districts. In September 2016, Judge Thomas Moukawsher of the State Superior Court in Hartford decided the case *Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding v. Rell* by calling on the state to rethink the entire public school funding system, saying that the current system, “left rich school districts to flourish and poor school dis-

<sup>11</sup> Testani, Michael J. “Memo from the Superintendent.” Bridgeport Public Schools, January 29, 2021. [www.bridgeportedu.net/Page/16314](http://www.bridgeportedu.net/Page/16314).

<sup>12</sup> Harris, Elizabeth A. “Judge, Citing Inequality, Orders Connecticut to Overhaul Its School System.” *New York Times*, September 7, 2016. [www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/nyregion/connecticut-public-schools-inequality-judge-orders.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/nyregion/connecticut-public-schools-inequality-judge-orders.html).