We asked Wisconsin high schools how many students failed a class during first semester. It's not pretty.

In one Wisconsin school district, two in five high school students failed a class during first semester. In another, the fall failure rate was four times what it had been in recent years.

Almost all of the 60 school districts responding to a USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin survey reported that more high school students failed a class last fall than in recent years, and most blamed the same factor: online learning.

Students' first-semester grades offer the earliest hard evidence of the toll the pandemic has taken on learning this year. Because the state Department of Public Instruction doesn't report such data, the USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin sent a survey to all the state's districts asking administrators about their high schools' failure rates.

Nine in 10 said failure rates had gone up. While most schools reported only a slight increase, others reported failure rates that had doubled or tripled.

In the Oshkosh Area School District, 32% of high school students failed at least one course last semester, up from 12-13% in a typical academic year. Records from the Waukesha School District revealed a failure rate of 30%, ballooning almost four-fold from the year before. The Sheboygan Area School District reported 38% of students failed at least one fall class.

While the struggles of online learning was a common theme in responses, in-person learning was no silver bullet: Many districts that offered some face-to-face instruction reported higher failure rates than in past years. Officials

often noted that increased absences hampered the continuity and overall quality of instruction.

Some schools reported level, or even reduced failure rates last semester. Most of them encouraged all students to participate in face-to-face learning, unless someone in their family was medically vulnerable. And they made an extra effort to tell parents when their students were on track to fail.

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Even with time to prepare, online learning was difficult

Distrustful after a bumpy rollout of online learning in the spring, many parents argued last fall that it wouldn't be as effective, and that children's mental health problems would mount if they remained shut out of classrooms and isolated at home.

Reflecting on the fall semester, many administrators said those worries were warranted. Teachers struggled to keep students engaged and meet all their needs.

The state's largest school districts, which were most likely to be online-only, reported some of the highest failure rates. They also have higher-than-average proportions of students in vulnerable populations — such as students of color, English language learners, kids receiving special education services and those who are economically disadvantaged.

At Milwaukee Public Schools — the state's largest school system with over 70,000 students, most of whom are low-income children of color — instruction has remained almost entirely online. The percent of MPS high school students failing one or more classes this fall reached 30%, an increase of nearly 12 percentage points from the previous year.

At the Appleton Area School District, which also stayed online-only, the number of students who failed nearly doubled, to 28%, and the district's at-risk populations struggled more than their peers.

About 12% of Appleton's students have disabilities, but they made up nearly 23% of students failing at least one class. About 7% of students are English learners, yet they made up 16% of those failing, and about a quarter of students receive free and reduced lunch, but they made up 54% of those failing.

At small schools that offered hybrid or full-time in-person options, officials noted that students learning full-time online were more likely to fail a class.

In the Oostburg School District, 19 of the 22 high schoolers who failed a class had chosen the district's fully online option.

At Lincoln High School in Wisconsin Rapids, nearly half of students attending school fully online failed one class or more, compared to 16% of in-person students.

In the Johnson Creek School District, a district between Milwaukee and Madison that serves fewer than 1,000 students, part of administrators' strategy for preventing an academic slide was only allowing students to go online if they were medically vulnerable to serious COVID complications, or had family members who were.

Superintendent Michael Garvey said it wasn't an entirely popular decision. The district lost some families who enrolled their children in a neighboring district's hybrid model. But he said it allowed them to home in on two high-quality educational options, rather than several mediocre options.

"In the summer we prepared to do either. We always said to our staff and our families that we'd either go all virtual, or we're going to be in-person, but we're not going to have a cafeteria menu where parents can pick and choose what they want," Garvey said. "We just believed we couldn't sustain several models at the quality we expect if we're trying to do them at the same time."

Garvey said the district's size and circumstances made its situation easier than other districts faced. Johnson Creek had small classrooms before the pandemic, making social distancing easier. It already provided technological devices to all students. And the district's school board gave administrators the freedom to make decisions about learning models.

But Garvey said he is proud of what they accomplished. While the failure rate stayed level at 15%, the number of students who failed a course decreased from 30 the previous year to 26 this fall.

And most of the families that opted into online learning have returned now that they've seen school can be safe even as the pandemic continues.

"We've been fortunate to be able to see most of our students every day, on a regular schedule, as normally as normal can be in COVID," Garvey said.

Changes, absences also tripped up students

In-person learning wasn't always the antidote. School districts that reported some of the highest failure rates offered hybrid learning models that blended online and in-person instruction.

Although the Waukesha School District, a suburban Milwaukee district, offered several forms of hybrid learning models, records revealed nearly 30% of high school students failed a class — almost four times more than in a typical school year.

The 38% failure rate at the Sheboygan Area School District, which started the school year in a hybrid learning model and then transitioned to all-online learning in October, was nearly 50% higher compared to a year earlier.

In an interview with the Sheboygan Press, Superintendent Seth Harvatine said he didn't want to paint a picture of online students not being successful. He said the district had seen some families succeed — or do even better than before — in that option.

But it was clear to him that there was difference in instruction, with some students in classrooms and others online. Some students weren't engaged learning online, and some had extended absences due to quarantines or illness.

In the Howard-Suamico School District, a largely suburban district west of Green Bay, Bay Port High School principal Mike Frieder thought that switching learning models several times during the semester made it more difficult for kids not only to learn, but to also have their social and emotional needs met.

There, the failure rate swelled from 12% the previous fall to over 21% this year.

It was also tough on teachers, Frieder said, and it continues to be, as the Brown County school district currently offers a full-time in-person learning option in which students are allowed to "Zoom into class" if they're sick, in quarantine or uncomfortable going to school. Teachers address classrooms

where some students' faces are on a computer screen while other students sit in their desks.

Garvey said those challenges are why Johnson Creek tried so hard to remain open.

"The mental health issues from the isolation of COVID are real. Students need their classmates and their teachers," Garvey said. "And, quite honestly, teachers need students just as badly ... We didn't become teachers to talk to a computer."

'We're not just forgetting about those kids': Schools look for solutions

Walk through the hallways of Bay Port High on a Friday, and you may find kids, masked and socially distanced, rehearsing a song with fellow band, orchestra or choir students. They might be meeting with teachers to complete work for a class they failed. Or they might be in the school's woods, metals, culinary or art labs, working on a passion project.

There's no traditional school on Fridays. Instead, students have what Howard-Suamico calls "Pirate time," a designated day of choice, and part of an effort to make up for the learning lost last semester — not only academically, but socially and emotionally, too.

"The academic portion is significant, but our kids are passionate about a lot of other things, so we're trying to give some of those experiences back to them," Frieder said.

Bay Port originally created "Pirate time" over a year ago, before COVID-19. It consisted of two class periods every week, and students could use the time however they chose. Students falling behind academically had to make up

coursework, either through summer school or by retaking the course.

This year, knowing that more children than ever would be struggling, Frieder said they decided to rework the schedule to give them more "Pirate time" and allow more students to stay on track to graduate.

"We're not just forgetting about those kids, especially knowing the unique situation we're in," Frieder said.

Officials at the Appleton and Sheboygan school districts, too, said educators will use student support time built into their hybrid learning schedules to work with students who need to finish coursework, or turn an incomplete or failing grade into a passing letter grade.

Many other districts have also discussed expanding summer school offerings to students in need. And Gov. Tony Evers recently [suggested](#) schools could start the next school year early to help catch students up.

De Pere High School shortened class periods when instruction was entirely online at the pandemic's peak — not only to prevent fatigue from staring at a screen all day, said Principal Nick Joseph, but also to give teachers and struggling students extra time to work through problems.

While students might not have learned as much material as they had in the past, the shortened class periods allowed teachers and students to focus on what was most important.

Teachers had more time to identify students who were at risk of failing, and they sent letters home to parents in the middle of December. Those failing were required to come into school, masked and socially distanced, for extra support.

It appeared to work: The failure rate at the Brown County school decreased

by 3 percentage points, to 9% this fall.

"I think getting students back into the building, even though we were still learning virtually, and just providing that structure and time and holding them accountable really helped them," Joseph said.

Reporters Diana Dombrowski of the Sheboygan Press, Alex Groth of the Oshkosh Northwestern, Alec Johnson and Rory Linnane of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and Doug Schneider of the Green Bay Press Gazette contributed to this report.

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