

A long-exposure photograph of the Pennsylvania State Capitol building at night. The building's dome is illuminated with a warm, golden light, and its facade is lit up. Two tall, dark columns stand on either side of the building, framing it. The foreground shows a wide, dark road with light trails from cars, indicating traffic. Streetlights line the road, and a yellow diamond-shaped road sign is visible on the right side. The sky is a deep blue, suggesting twilight.

# Pennsylvania Insights Review

Published April 2021

# Executive Summary

From July through September 2020, we surveyed and spoke with state and local policymakers in Pennsylvania to understand how the government and private sector responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and what policymakers want to see from advocates during this time.

Policymakers identify education, public health and healthcare, and economic development as top issues facing the state as it recovers from COVID-19. This Review takes an in-depth look at education in Pennsylvania during COVID-19, as well as the business response to COVID-19 and the pandemic's impact on advocacy and constituent engagement.



## Education During COVID-19

- Policymakers highlight the need for additional funding for K-12 education and weigh the logistics and public health concerns of in-person learning.
- Policymakers support remote learning but worry that students without reliable access to computers and the internet will be left behind.
- Remote learning has exacerbated the issue of tech infrastructure, and both rural and urban communities experience challenges with internet accessibility and affordability.



## Business Response to COVID-19

- A majority of policymakers believe the private sector has been effective in its response to COVID-19.
- Policymakers want to hear from businesses about how they are supporting their local communities and taking care of their employees and customers.



## How Advocacy & Constituent Engagement Have Changed During COVID-19

- Policymakers who are active on social media emphasize increased engagement and transparency with constituents through virtual events.
- In-person meetings with advocates have shifted to phone and video conferencing, allowing for a greater volume of interactions but making personal connections more challenging to establish.





# Top Issues in Pennsylvania: Education, Public Health & Healthcare, and the Economy

Pennsylvania policymakers identify education, public health and healthcare, and economic development as three of the most pressing issues facing the state.

## Most Pressing Issues in the State

"As Pennsylvania looks to reopen communities and the economy, which of the following do you view as the most pressing issues facing the state?"



n = 399



### Education

*"Public education is important to my district. Before COVID, it was more about funding. Now, it's about delivery. There are going to be gaps and deficits throughout the year with online versus classroom learning, and it's important we address them."*

-State Senator



### Public Health/Healthcare

*"Before COVID, our top priority was healthcare, and certainly it will be healthcare afterwards. I'm talking about having access to healthcare, the rising cost of it, and the quality of it."*

-State Senator



### Economic Development

*"In my county, the major priorities are keeping people safe while balancing the success of the economy."*

-County Staff

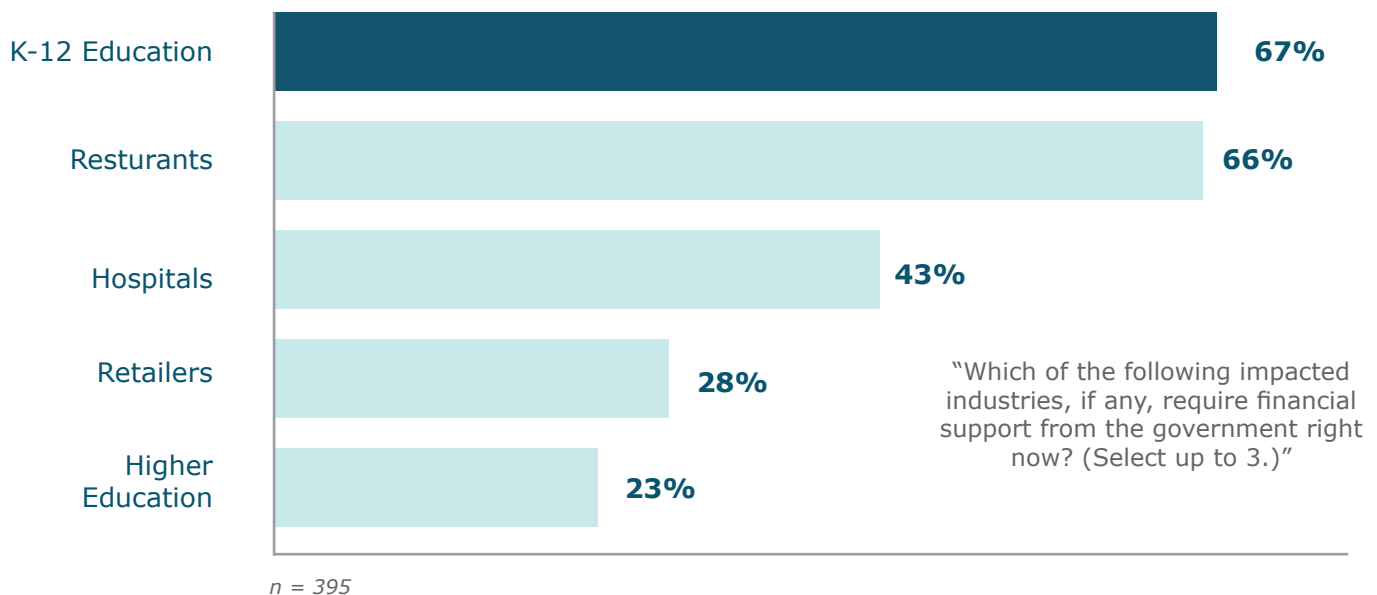
# **Education in Pennsylvania During COVID-19**

# Education In Pennsylvania During COVID-19

Our study shows that nearly half, 45%, of Pennsylvania policymakers identify education as one of the most pressing issues facing the state. Policymakers voice concerns about the finances, logistics, and public health implications of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Funding K-12 Education

67% of Pennsylvania policymakers pinpoint K-12 Education as an industry in need of financial support from the government.



## Logistics and Public Health of K-12 Education

As K-12 school systems looked to resume learning in Fall 2020, policymakers expressed mixed feelings over the relative advantages and disadvantages of in-person learning, remote learning, or a hybrid model.

*“At the school districts, folks are uneasy; they’re not sure which approach they’re going to take with schooling, and they want to make sure that their decision is going to keep everybody safe. They don’t want to start school if it’s in-person and one kid in the classroom turns out to have COVID. Everybody in that class then has to go home. You’ve lost the teacher or a teacher aide for two weeks. Parents then need childcare for a kid who’s in quarantine. So how does that work? All those things are still unanswered.”*

-Township Commissioner



# Education In Pennsylvania During COVID-19

## Digital Infrastructure for K-12 Education

### Remote Learning Considerations: Equitable Access to Computers and Internet

Policymakers worry that remote learning will widen the education gap between high-income and low-income students if school systems cannot ensure all students can access computers and the internet.

*“Our school district hasn’t been able to provide computers and technology resources for kids who can’t afford a computer, who don’t have multiple computers at home, or who don’t have access to WiFi. Those kids are being further left behind by a system that’s going entirely online.”*

-Municipal Staff

### The Digital Divide in Rural and Urban Communities: Access versus Affordability

Policymakers highlight internet access as a pressing issue in Pennsylvania as people transition to remote work and remote learning. Policymakers identify internet access as a barrier in rural areas and cost of service as a barrier in cities.

*“Do we have the capacity to make sure folks have access to the internet that they need? That’s a concern of ours. I’m not just talking about rural broadband expansion. I’m talking about inner city locations where many folks simply don’t have access to the internet because of their employment status or income.”*

-State Senator

*“Because of remote learning, there is a great need for WiFi. Some of our neighborhoods have very poor connections, and some families and individuals just can’t afford it. We’ve been looking at how to extend and promote WiFi in the city. Soon we will have hot spots that will provide WiFi to families in need.”*

-Senior County Staff

### The Private Sector’s Role in Improving Internet Access and Affordability

As Pennsylvania state and local policymakers decide how to allocate resources to equip students and workers with the technology they need, the private sector earns praise for its contributions that have increased internet access and affordability in both rural and urban communities.

*“This telecom company is running fiber all throughout our small town in every home. Some of the more rural and outstretched areas are not going to necessarily get it right off the bat, but the company has signed a contract with us that they will provide fiber right to the premises of every house. They will put a WiFi modem in every house, and then if they have TV, phone, or internet, everything will stream right through that device.”*

-Mayor

*“Comcast has stepped up and provided internet for low-income families and those that need cyber connection to attend school. This means that everyone can connect to school and online lessons. Folks can stay connected with their family. It can give people access to entertainment, and when you’re supposed to be maintaining social distance and quarantining at home, having some source of entertainment is important.”*

-Staff, Pennsylvania Senate





# Business Response to COVID-19

The majority of Pennsylvania policymakers surveyed believe that the private sector has been somewhat or very effective in tackling COVID-19 challenges.

## Private Sector Effectiveness in Tackling COVID-19 Challenges

"In your view, how effective has the response of the private sector (e.g., businesses and associations) been in tackling COVID-19 challenges?"



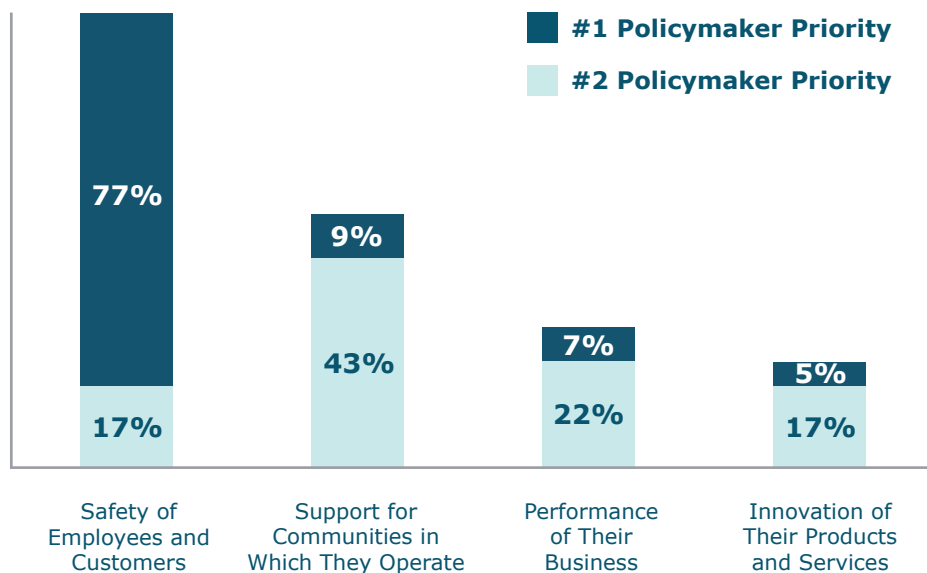
■ Very Effective ■ Somewhat Effective ■ Neither Effective nor Ineffective  
■ Somewhat Ineffective ■ Very Ineffective

## What to Focus on to Support State Recovery

Policymakers overwhelmingly want to hear from businesses about how they are taking care of their employees and customers. They also want to hear how businesses are supporting their local communities.

*"The first thing companies should do is invest in their employees. Make sure that workers are paid and have safe working conditions. Then they can invest in their local community, for example, by helping to keep small businesses open. Companies should reinvest in the communities from which they made their profit."*

-State Senator



n = 367

"To support Pennsylvania's recovery, what should businesses focus on?"

# **How Advocacy and Constituent Engagement Have Changed During COVID-19**

# How Advocacy and Constituent Engagement Have Changed During COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, government employees face new and unprecedented challenges to conduct their work. In response, the Pennsylvania legislature adapted its operations to accommodate remote work. There has been an increase in digital communication and changes to how voting and committee meetings occur.

## How Constituent Engagement Has Changed

Policymakers identify positives and negatives of remote governing at the state and local levels, in terms of its impact on their working relationships with constituents and advocates.



Policymakers find that they and their staff can address constituent concerns similar to how they did pre-pandemic using email, phone, and social media.

*"We've been working remotely now since the middle of March, but we still are taking phone calls, responding to emails, etc. In terms of serving our constituents, it has been an adjustment, but we've found that we've been able to answer our constituents' concerns pretty much the same as we were prior to COVID."*

-State Representative



Policymakers noted that the switch to digital town halls and social media 'Live' events increases transparency and accessibility for constituents to engage with policymakers.

*"At the beginning, we had significant engagement on COVID. We had online town halls and Facebook Live streams, and a lot of people engaged online; we felt very effective. A lot of people communicate with the Senator personally through Facebook Messenger, and several of us have access to that. The online thing can work."*

-Staff, Pennsylvania Senate

# How Engagement With Advocates Has Changed

In-person advocacy meetings have moved to video conferencing platforms and phone calls. Policymakers find that video conferencing imitates face-to-face communication, if imperfectly.

*"I believe any platform where you can have a dialogue is the best. Especially now with so many things moving and changing, that I want to have that in-depth face-to-face dialogue, even if it is electronically. It is still the most effective."*

-State Senator,

## Digital Communication has Both Positive and Negative Impacts



### Ability to Meet with More Stakeholders

*"There were just as many if not more meetings during the pandemic because it was easier to go from meeting to meeting, especially for those of us who don't live close to the Capitol. At times I'd have meetings with my staff then immediately have a meeting with a stakeholder."*

-State Representative

### More Efficient Communication

*"The pandemic made it easier to communicate. You can communicate virtually and you're not scheduling in-person meetings that require travel and time. It makes it so conversations are immediately about the issues."*

-Staff, Pennsylvania Senate



### Zoom Fatigue

*"I feel like I live in a Zoom world and I have to remind myself to get up from my desk and move around. There were days when I thought, 'Oh, my God. You've just been sitting the entire day going from one Zoom meeting to another.'"*

-State Representative

### Lack of Personal Connection

*"If the meeting can't be in-person, then it can at least be on a platform with a video aspect to it. I absolutely miss being in-person because this all still feels a bit artificial. It's just a substitute."*

-State Senator

## Looking Forward

Policymakers express optimism that the positive aspects of digital communication—increased openness and transparency—can carry over even once in-person contact is allowed to resume.

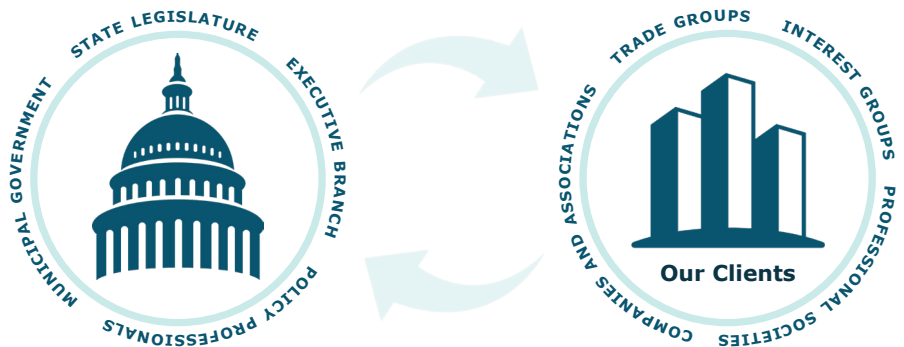
*"There are times face-to-face meetings and contact is still the preferred method depending upon the issue. But I also think because technology has caught up, folks got comfortable with it. It could open up an opportunity moving forward after the pandemic to have more discussion and be open and transparent with the people you serve and the stakeholders that are looking at you as a policymaker to advance measures. It's really a win-win situation."*

-State Representative

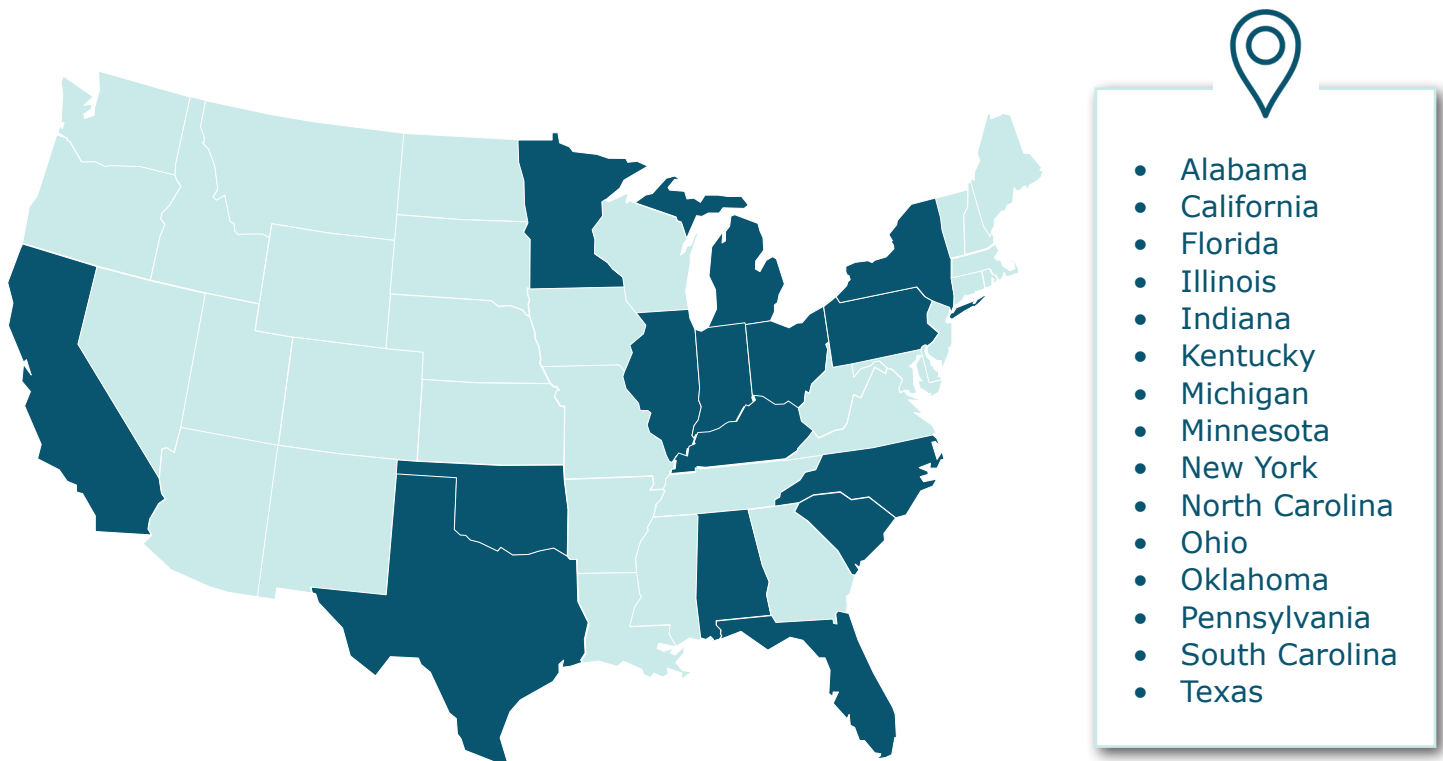
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States Insights Review**

# States Insights Review

Ballast Research provides direct feedback from senior policymakers to government relations professionals, helping advocates make better use of policymakers' time and provide the resources most useful to those in government.



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