

# Lessons from Remote Learning in Six School Systems

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# Reflections on Remote Learning in Six School Systems

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Ever since schools closed in March 2020, CRPE has tracked a sample of school districts and charter networks as they tried to reach students and provide instruction. This has led to a [series of analyses](#).

We also looked more deeply into a smaller number of districts and charter management organizations (CMOs), hoping to understand why they took particular approaches to remote learning and how their experiences last spring affected their plans for the fall. This report is based on our dives into big-city districts (Baltimore and Chicago), a large inner suburb (Aurora, CO), a rural district (Roaring Fork, CO), and two CMOs working in urban areas (Green Dot and LEARN).

This group of districts and CMOs is diverse but not necessarily nationally representative. We could only study localities where district leaders would talk at length with us. Each of the brief case summaries is worth reading. They reveal how organizations built for one thing (in-person instruction) struggled to do very different things: organize remote learning, prepare and distribute food for families at home, and get computers or tablets and internet connections to as many students as possible. Differences among the cases are the result of many things—principally district leadership, local politics, school and central office capacities, local resources and support organizations, and relationships with city government. In general, the districts and CMOs we studied:

**Addressed family trauma and financial insecurity by addressing needs** for meals and social services—understanding that the absence of these supports would be barriers to student learning. The numbers of meals provided to date are stunning (e.g., 15 million in Chicago, 1.5 million in Aurora). Districts and CMOs also worked to broker social services. Entities with strong previous connections to social service agencies (e.g., Baltimore via its community schools, LEARN with its in-school social workers, and Roaring Fork’s Family Resource Department) were particularly effective. Still, district and CMO leaders were concerned about trauma students had experienced (due to the pandemic, job losses, illness and deaths in families, and broader social unrest, as well as school closures) and expected to deal with serious challenges in the fall.

**Identified serious digital access gaps and moved to get devices and internet connections to families** that lacked them and therefore could not benefit from online instruction. Districts invested in Chromebooks and similar devices—some in the tens

of thousands—and used school buses to create wifi hotspots, but still had difficulty connecting with some students. As schools open this fall, some districts are not getting the promised deliveries of devices due to a nationwide shortage, so the digital divide still looms.

**Improved remote learning over time by tightening expectations and providing systemwide guidance.** Though many started last spring with distribution of paper packets and canned instructional videos, the depth and quality of instruction improved over time. By the end of the 2019–20 school year, students could tap into specially prepared webinars and, in most cases, live coursework providing grade-level instruction in multiple subjects. Online schooling exposed wide variation in teacher capacity to system leaders and also to parents. In response, systemwide guidance on curricula, scheduling, and expectations for teachers became clearer and tighter over time. Increasing numbers of teachers made check-in calls to students, and some became more available for student counseling.

**Moved from loose to tight on student attendance and grading.** Experience from last spring convinced superintendents and CMO heads that a lack of clear expectations and consequences had allowed some students to drift, leading to inequities. A focus on consequential grade-level instruction also became the centerpiece of strategies to remedy student learning loss caused by the shutdown. Students will be taught at grade level and get help in real time with any skills or information needed to make progress.

**Sought state and federal guidance but got delayed and mixed signals.** State and federal governments were themselves affected by unstable leadership and uncertainties about the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The districts and CMOs we studied wished for clearer guidance both on COVID-19 safety and instructional approaches, but, recognizing it was not forthcoming, used their own professional judgment and advice from state and local public health and officials.

**Experienced growing political pressures** as stakeholders, who were at first quiescent, developed agendas and became active. Teachers unions were the first and most potent interest groups to organize pressure by demanding remote learning to minimize risk of COVID-19 infection. Parent groups with competing agendas also emerged. [Surveys show](#) that many (though not the majority) parents and teachers wanted in-person school to start in September. These groups were disappointed in the ultimate plans adopted, but their pressures for a quick return will be felt.

**Invested for fall 2020 remote learning** in teacher training, parent education, and clear scheduling for teachers and students, to help parents (and teachers who were also parents) manage the demands of work and student support. Some district and CMO leaders were optimistic about parents being better informed and more demanding after a spring season spent helping their children with schoolwork. Districts and CMOs also continually broadened the circle of stakeholders with whom they discussed priorities and tradeoffs, and gained better external communication via websites and newsletters.

**Were forced to open all-remote in the fall,** due to a combination of public health considerations and union pressures. Though districts and CMOs had planned for at least some in-person instruction supplemented with remote learning, all were forced to postpone these plans. In most cases the strongest demand for all-remote instruction came from teachers unions. In Aurora, however, the school board, distrusting public health information available from the state, put an end to the district's and union's hybrid learning plans. Hybrid learning plans in all the districts and CMOs will eventually be put into action when COVID-19 infection rates are lower.

There were, however, differences among the districts and CMOs we studied because of differences in their size, centralization, and susceptibility to political—particularly union— influence:

**Small districts and charter networks had advantages.** Though even the smallest entities (Roaring Fork and the CMOs) experienced conflicts and missteps, they benefited from closer and more informal connections between district/CMO leaders, teachers, and school leaders. Relationships with teachers unions were less formal and oppositional, so it was easier to reach provisional agreements about teacher roles or avoid regulating them altogether.

**Larger districts had little visibility into what teachers and students were doing.** Leaders in large districts could not personally observe every school and learned what they could from attendance databases and limited anecdotal evidence. CMOs and smaller districts had much greater visibility into schools. Last spring, Baltimore's superintendent was able to learn a great deal about some schools by joining online classes where he observed major differences in quality, which could lead to future differentiation in teacher roles. But not all schools were visible in this way.

**The two large decentralized districts needed to increase coordination to mount districtwide responses.** Baltimore and Chicago had for many years pursued reforms based on school-level autonomy and differentiation. Decentralization empowered some schools to make their own responses to the COVID-19 crisis, but it challenged district leaders as they sought to get information, provide meals, distribute devices, and connect all students to the internet. **Superintendents responded** by creating task forces drawn from across the district and increasing the flow of information upward from schools. As the spring wore on, device and meal distribution and other disaster responses became more centralized, but district leaders still deferred to charter schools and district-run schools that were embedded in support networks and able to adapt quickly to remote learning.

District and CMO leaders learned a great deal, sometimes from their successes and sometimes from failures. Though all entities learned common lessons, some individual discoveries stand out:

**Aurora:** Access to the internet is a precondition for education—as important as a good school building in normal times. For some families, access requires hands-on assistance, not just a device and an internet connection.

**Baltimore:** Online instruction reveals huge variation in teaching quality and what's taught. Districts should try to expose as many students as possible to the best teachers and courses.

**Chicago:** Student attendance and effort increase when expectations and consequences (e.g., grades) are clearly stated.

**LEARN:** Educators need to see tech solutions through parents' eyes, and make sure they are as easy as possible to use, and still expect parents to need help.

**Green Dot:** Teachers need clarity about how remote learning is supposed to work and opportunities to practice before going live.

**Roaring Fork** (also Baltimore): School systems should create the infrastructure to support students and families in meeting their basic needs before crises occur, to ensure that students and parents can attend to learning.

Last spring's experiences suggest that district and CMO leaders will perform several challenging balancing acts this fall:

- deciding which aspects of remote learning are nonnegotiable systemwide and how to support school initiative and problem-solving,
- ensuring effective support for both student well-being and academic learning,
- making smart decisions about which materials and services to develop in-house and which ones to source from other providers or community partners,
- coordinating with other levels of government around resources to support learning and safety, and
- negotiating with teachers unions to simultaneously keep teachers safe and increase teacher-student contact.

District and CMO leaders will also deal with differences among teachers and parents, some of whom are eager and others reluctant to return to in-person instruction. Uncertainty about future resources and needs are a huge challenge and, to date, states and federal agencies have not stepped up to mitigate this. Finally, many places will endure funding cuts and experience election year instability in state and federal policy.

Even as district and CMO leaders work through these and other challenges, one thing we know for sure: there is only so much to be learned from the district and charter network levels about how schools are responding to the COVID-19 challenge or what students are experiencing. In the coming year, much more ambitious studies than this are needed, looking deeply at what is happening in representative samples of schools.

## About This Project

This is the first qualitative analysis released as part of the American School District Panel (ASDP)—a national effort by CRPE, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, and Kitamba to surface and examine trends in the policy and practice of school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs).

This groundbreaking effort will enable district and CMO leaders an opportunity to share their perspectives and contribute to decisions about education policy and practice. Researchers will survey leaders and staff from a representative panel of school districts and CMOs across the country, as well as conduct a complementary set of qualitative studies, following these districts and CMOs over time to monitor trends.

This analysis is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. We also thank all the school system leaders who, under difficult circumstances, took the time to share lessons and insights with us.

While this analysis draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.

# The Shock of Last Spring Suppresses Conflicts and Complexity that Surface Later: Lessons from Aurora Public Schools' COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

## Aurora Public Schools

*A suburban Colorado district's experience last spring and planning for the fall shows the benefits and limits of crisis management in dealing with COVID-19. Leaders must navigate interest group politics and intergovernmental relations, not just technical and instructional challenges.*

### Key lessons:

- Textbook crisis management—clear decisions, cross-functional responses, and unified operations—was critical for addressing real problems last spring.
- As the crisis wore on, more complicated issues surfaced: resource problems, uncertain guidance, and political conflict.

**Number of schools: 65**

**Number of students: ~40,000**

**Grades served: PreK-12**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.*

**Families with income below the poverty level: 18%**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2014–2018.*

When Colorado Governor Jared Polis declared a state of emergency on March 10 in response to the coronavirus, the timing was fortunate for Aurora Public Schools (APS). Spring break was starting three days later. To provide a little more breathing room, the district extended its break by one week. “We thought we might be able to clear that initial incubation period, with the idea that we could all come back,” the district’s superintendent said. But by the end of that first week of break, “we all learned differently,” he added. It was clear that the state and district would not go back to normal.

In the months that followed, APS’s response to COVID-19 would reveal the promise but also some of the limits of a careful approach to crisis management. By defining its spring response as a problem of crisis management, the district was able to provide much-needed resources to



its community. But by the summer, APS's equally careful plans for reopening ran into a broader set of issues: the challenges of providing rigorous instruction rather than minimal access to learning activities, ongoing problems with internet access in the community, a lack of state-level safety guidance that hindered planning, and growing tensions over who would decide when and how the district would reopen. These problems underscore how local district responses to the virus—no matter how rational and organized—are increasingly buffeted and complicated by the environment as the pandemic drags on.

## A crisis response

By extending spring break to 10 days, APS bought some time to figure out how to provide meals to families, distribute technology, and develop a basic remote learning plan. By design, the district's remote learning plan wasn't a replacement for school. Instead, it was "a crisis response," the superintendent explained. "This [remote learning] was not school. We were not going to try and reinvent school in the span of 10 days. We were just as frank as we could be that [remote learning] . . . is about providing kids and families access to educational opportunities during a health crisis."

The district's focus on the health crisis was well placed. COVID-19 was hitting families like those in APS especially hard. Many students were newcomers to the United States, speaking over 160 different languages and coming from more than 130 countries. Seventy-eight percent are native Spanish speakers. And 68 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. Many of the district's families are headed by low-wage, essential workers. By June, the superintendent said unemployment in the district had reached 30 percent.

Reflecting on the spring, one leader said, "I very quickly fell into that [crisis] training and that response mode . . . we quickly fell into our mode of how we set up our incident response team and how we respond to crisis and tried to establish anchor points of what's known and operate from there."

Coordination was critical. "We got everybody on the phone or by video chat and said, look, here's going to be our single source of truth for information," explained the superintendent. "You're going to hear a lot of things. You're going to hear a lot of news. Here's where our source of truth is and understand that that's what we're responding to and nothing and nobody else."

It was textbook crisis management: clear executive decision-making, a cross-functional incident response team, coordinated and unified operational structures and processes, and information sharing and awareness. With a coordinated crisis management response, the district helped its families weather the storm. By the end of the summer it had delivered over 1.5 million meals to its families (APS's total enrollment is 38,000 students).

When it came to instruction, the district's stopgap response emphasized access. But leaders knew they would need to offer a more robust approach in the fall: rigorous learning, clear expectations, better structures and supports. "We know what we did in the spring, we know why we did it. That is not what we're doing in the fall," a leader noted.

## From crisis to complexity

As with its initial crisis response, APS turned to a textbook framework to plan for the fall, this time from the [Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center](#). Using the REMS-TA framework, the district launched recovery teams around four key issues: academics, physical and structural, business functions, and social-emotional/behavior. Each team identified challenges and lessons from the spring. They developed action plans for three scenarios: one where students would split time between in-person and remote learning, one that was fully remote, and one that was fully in-person.

By late June, APS was ready to present its recommendation for reopening to the school board. Based on health guidance and the tradeoffs presented by the three scenarios, the district recommended starting with an in-person cohort model for PreK–8 students (students attend school but stay with the same group of peers all day, each day) and a hybrid model for high school (students combine in-person and remote learning). The district also recommended providing a fully online option for any family that wanted it.

A month later, APS's school board voted to abandon the in-person/hybrid reopening plan and start school all online instead. No single event or information was responsible for the about-face. But as the short-term crisis stretched into the summer, a host of issues—resource problems, health trends, and politics—undercut the district's best-laid plans.

## Technology needs remain unmet

As APS planned for the fall, two of its proposed models included remote learning (the fully remote model and the hybrid model for high school). Parent surveys suggested that the 30 percent of students were likely to enroll in the fully remote option. So clearly, families needed access to technology and the internet if their children were going to engage in school.

Comcast had provided free or reduced-cost internet access to families in response to the initial crisis in the spring. But into the summer and beyond, families in Aurora were still struggling to get access. The digital divide was striking. In June, a district survey found that 15 percent of families did not have internet access. Part of the problem, district leaders explained, was simply that many families did not have credit cards to open an account. The district was looking for ways to broker internet services for families without requiring credit cards or other information. But even into the summer, “The internet is still a big issue,” a district leader said.

## Uncertainty from the state

Even as APS was confronting the lack of internet access, it was getting mixed signals from the state about both instruction and health and safety that impacted its planning. Colorado had helped districts by waiving seat time requirements in the spring. But in June, it had still not provided much guidance about what would happen in the fall. “The thing that is most

challenging with [the state] right now,” said one district leader, is that, to plan for the fall, “I need to know: What’s going to be the seat time requirement? What’s going to be the graduation requirements? What are going to be . . . are we doing assessments this year? Are we going to keep up our accountability framework? Right. Because all those things inform how I set up school in August. I have no answers to any of those things.”

When the governor negotiated a summertime deal to provide masks to all teachers in the state during the school year, that was helpful. But guidance from the state’s health department could also upend the district’s plans on short notice. For example, the same week that district leaders were planning to brief the school board on the reopening plans, the Colorado Department of Public Health released new guidance. A district leader explained,

We got brand new guidance from the Colorado Department of Public Health. And that came out on Monday [the briefing was scheduled for Thursday]. And that gave some tighter or more specific type parameters in some places that we had not necessarily anticipated around our cohort model. And so for example, very specifically, the number of adults who can flow in and out of a classroom, with the cohort of kids. And so now we’re looking at our schedules to say, okay, can we adjust that, particularly at the secondary level?

### Suppressed political conflict surfaces

In the spring, APS’s crisis response was well-suited to the suddenness and uncertainty of the moment. For the most part, stakeholders appeared to rally around the district and leaders were able to run the response with little pushback or conflict. Especially since the instructional response in the spring emphasized “access” rather than instruction, the district did not make demands on teachers that were outside of the labor contract. “We didn’t do anything that was dramatically outside of the master agreement or that they felt was outside of the master agreement. And so [the need to negotiate with the union] never really surfaced for us.”

As APS developed its plans for the fall, it included union members and union-selected teachers on its planning teams. At the time, district leaders thought that the smooth sailing from the spring would continue. “My take is if I haven’t heard noise by now, given the fact that we’re involved in planning out the scenarios, [the union doesn’t] expect it to be a hurdle we can’t overcome.”

But as the national conversation around reopening heated up and cases in Colorado continued to rise, the union’s members voiced concerns about returning to school. “There was definitely strong concern about their safety,” said a district leader. The union presented its results to the board and, in the eyes of district leaders, was starting to “advocate more heavily for either a move to a hybrid model or a move to a fully remote model. So that is certainly a really big factor and that has the potential to heavily influence the board.”

Eventually, Denver Public Schools stepped back from its reopening plan. Then, on July 24, the APS school board voted for an all-online return to school. In early August, the district told the

board that it would tie any reopening plans to public health data. But the board decided to order the district to start online regardless of the measures. Board members said they were suspicious about the trustworthiness of public health measures. One told [Chalkbeat Colorado](#), “I do feel like I’m putting [the superintendent] . . . in an unfair position. . . . But I’d rather have a frustrated superintendent than grieving parents.”

### Lessons going forward

In some ways, APS’s response to COVID-19 in the spring shows the benefits of a well-managed and planned crisis response. In the immediate aftermath of school closures, the system provided clarity. But the shock of the spring may also have suppressed conflicts and complexity. As the crisis wore on and the pandemic became the new normal, the district’s rational approach bumped into a host of new challenges. From resource problems to mixed signals to politics, external forces buffeted and constrained the district’s response. State and federal leaders in particular have complicated matters by providing unclear guidance, inadequate resources, and little political cover to local leaders.

While no one can predict what will happen in the months ahead, these complexities are unlikely to go away. As the crisis continues, local leaders must navigate not only technical and instruction challenges but longer-standing interest group politics and intergovernmental relations as well.

# Charm City Leaders Adapt as They Tackle Equity Gaps: Lessons from Baltimore City Public Schools’ COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

## Baltimore City Public Schools

*A long-suffering district in a long-suffering city has its fragile progress threatened by the virus amid a mounting reckoning with race and inequality. Rather than succumb to the threat or try to wrest control from a decentralized system, leaders moved boldly and swiftly to control what they could (food, devices) and became an organization set on learning and adapting quickly.*

### Key lessons:

- Online instruction can give district leaders new visibility into the variation in teaching quality and what’s taught. Districts should try to expose as many students as possible to the best teachers and courses.
- Social supports, including those offered by community schools, can help form connections with families and remove barriers to learning.
- In a crisis, decentralized districts can benefit from centralization in some key areas, including communication, expectation-setting, and curriculum quality.
- It pays to review data and feedback from parents, teachers, and students, and make necessary course corrections.

**Number of schools: 161**

**Number of students: ~79,000**

**Grades served: PreK-12**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.*

**Families with income below the poverty level: 30.3%**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2014–2018.*

When Maryland’s governor ordered all schools closed on March 12, Baltimore was not a COVID-19 hot spot. But there was little doubt that the city would soon be profoundly affected by the virus due to its high levels of poverty, cramped housing conditions, and prevalence of blue-collar workers who had to continue working in close quarters. Sure enough, by May, the

city had become the most impacted jurisdiction in the state, with an infection rate three times that of Seattle, one of the cities affected earliest in the pandemic.

Baltimore City's schools were unprepared for the shutdown, with too few children with laptops and uneven wifi availability. A commitment to decentralization meant that schools had focused their budgets on current services and hadn't invested in infrastructure for remote learning.

Rather than succumb to the threat by trying to wrest total control from a decentralized school system, district leaders moved swiftly to control what they could, distributing food and establishing connectivity, like their peers in other school systems.

In March, district leaders urged school leaders to mount whatever form of remote learning they could. By June, increasing numbers of schools were delivering synchronous instruction, and all had greatly increased engagement with students and parents. However, some schools still relied primarily on videos and printed materials.

## Background

Baltimore has become a symbol of urban dysfunction. A [2015 study](#) showed it to be the worst big city in the country from the perspective of intergenerational mobility.

Low social mobility reflects major internal conflicts and social unrest in the city, painfully evident since Freddie Gray died in police custody in 2016. In Gray's Sandtown neighborhood, less than half the adults are employed, one-third of all residential structures are abandoned, and the violent crime rate is 23 per 1,000 residents, compared to a national rate of 3.7 per thousand. Nearly half the children in 9th through 12th grades are chronically absent from school and [more than 60 percent of adults have less than a high school diploma](#), compared to the national average of less than 10 percent.

Before the pandemic hit last February, Baltimore's unemployment rate was 4.7 percent, but it climbed to 11.5 percent by May—35 percent above the statewide average. Black unemployment historically and now is 33 percent, higher than the overall citywide employment rate. In the same period employment in travel and hospitality sectors—major employers of less skilled workers—fell by 47 percent.

## Springtime 2020

When schools were hit by the sudden closure in March, district leaders first prioritized food and connectivity. The district relied on individual schools to hand out devices. In total, they distributed 25,000 Chromebooks and created 10,000 new wifi hotspots. However, as many as 10,000 students were still unconnected by June, and many who have devices have not logged on to instruction available from the schools.

Baltimore schools had enjoyed significant autonomy about instructional methods and sequencing of materials. Because most schools pre-pandemic focused on improving traditional in-person instruction, only a few had invested in the equipment and connectivity required for remote learning. This became the number one priority districtwide after schools closed last March, and the district seized the initiative on connectivity—not relying on individual principals to act.

Schools continued to have clear guidance on pacing and sequencing of instruction along with freedom on teaching strategy. What schools offered varied tremendously depending on faculty capacity and families' ability to access online instruction. Some schools still had to rely on study sheets, while others provided synchronous instruction. Some students performed labs over videoconference, while their neighbors received no science instruction at all. Principals reported that some young people connected *more deeply* in a nontraditional setting. As the leader of one alternative school told the superintendent, "You know Dr. S, I got to tell you. Some of our kids we never really saw that much . . . they're the ones logging in."

Many schools' use of Zoom and other social media tools gave district leaders unprecedented insight into what was being taught and how well. When teachers started putting class sessions online, they became visible to parents and to district leaders. According to Superintendent Sonja Santilese, vast differences in teaching became obvious. Some teachers excelled at setting clear expectations and providing high-quality virtual instruction for their students. Others lacked those strengths but did well in small-group follow-up, filling in items that students had missed by tutoring or helping parents stay engaged in student learning. This led district leaders to ask: How do we get the best teachers in front of the students that need them most?

The district hoped in the upcoming school year to extend the reach of those teachers who delivered excellent online instruction by broadcasting their lessons to schools across the district, and relying on other classroom teachers to lead discussion and for tutoring and enrichment.<sup>1</sup> The district also worked on developing a districtwide online school that any student or parent could access for remote learning.

Parents who logged into Zoom or other online media, or who had children in different schools, could see the differences among teachers. One alert parent had children in two schools, both considered successful. According to a district administrator:

[One parent's] child has a teacher who could not navigate and so literally only had posted videos, no live. The other had full live every day and loved it. I don't think the teacher that didn't post is not necessarily a good teacher, [but lacked] the ability to manipulate and understand the platform. And my neighbor's child actually has a teacher that's doing science experiments via video, and there's another one who's like, 'Well, my kids haven't gotten any science.'

District leaders considered the new transparency and schools' dependence on parents as partners in instruction, and welcomed "the power of an informed demand by a community, customer, stakeholder group. Informed parents make less easily-placated customers, but customers much better positioned to make the work more effective."

<sup>1</sup> The idea of designating extremely good presenters to do "first teach," and give hundreds or thousands of student access to them, is central to Baltimore's thinking about the future. It could not be implemented last spring or even as schools prepared to open this fall, but district leaders are sure it can be done, and within the collective bargaining agreement. As one said, "We haven't really used the flexibility in the CBA [collective bargaining agreement]. . . . I think we have built in our compensation system the potential for role differentiation that would do this. The challenge for us is, and this is the district's fault, this is not teachers' fault. We never really pursued it because of changing leadership at the district level."



### *Not going it alone*

District leaders did not believe the district had all the expertise and resources needed to serve children during the spring or later, so they welcomed help.

During the spring, district leaders started considering possible outside partners to develop a districtwide online school. Though the district had its own considerable capacities, one leader said, “We might not have all the internal expertise to do this well, and there is no need to fake it. We’d rather partner with someone than give kids less than the best available.” District leaders were also open to partnerships with private schools and parent groups, considering these a natural element of public education in the pandemic. They did not raise the specter of white or middle-class flight:

A significant percentage of the people pushing for that access are brown and Black, low-income folks, working class folks, working income-level folks who want an option for their children that addresses both character needs, academic needs and is rooted in their community.

Charter schools had long been part of Baltimore’s landscape, and district leaders were open to more partnerships with both conventional charters and micro-schools, especially to increase the number of Black and brown providers. As one district leader said, “They’re people who have models of what they can do that I wished they could do inside the traditional system but until we get to the place where we can support that, we need to recruit.”

Before the pandemic, Baltimore had created 75 community schools, with diverse partners to enhance social, health, and academic support for students. These schools were also among those with the closest relationships with families—which in turn led to far greater student participation in remote learning last spring. As superintendent Santilese commented, “The schools that had the strongest connections to families prior to the pandemic were most successful in maintaining a sense of cohesiveness, even in a remote learning environment. Those schools who were challenged with that were even more challenged in a remote learning environment.”

### *Communication*

As one district leader observed, the success of the district’s efforts to provide instruction during the pandemic depended on the ability “to communicate and receive feedback from the variety of stakeholders. Schools will not run if we come out with a plan that does not have significant teacher fingerprint and influence on it.”

But communication with professional educators was just the tip of the iceberg. Outreach involved nearly 17,000 families, 4,900 teachers, more than 300 school leaders, and 1,850 students, as well as more than 55 partner organizations—through interviews, meetings, surveys, town halls, focus groups, and working groups. District leaders also met with the Baltimore teachers union two to three times per week starting in the spring, provided regular committee meeting updates to the Board throughout the recovery planning process, and connected with elected officials through focus groups, weekly calls with legislative leadership, addressing city council committee hearings, and participating in legislative town halls.



## Looking ahead to fall

The district's outreach to many constituencies revealed a challenging diversity of views, especially about how school should open this fall. Families and school leaders were twice as favorable about a hybrid model as teachers—41 percent to 21 percent. Half of families and school leaders, but three-quarters of school staff preferred virtual learning only. Only 12 percent of parents favored all in-person learning, but even fewer teachers (3 percent) and school leaders (1 percent) did so. In July, the Baltimore teachers union and local PTA issued a joint statement demanding remote learning as the only option for school opening in September.

On August 14 the district issued a plan, *Closing the Distance*, to open a week late in September and rely entirely on remote learning for the first six weeks. The district's plan sets criteria for shifting to hybrid approaches with students physically in school part-time. It also makes special provisions for students most in need of direct teacher contact. The current target date for launching hybrid learning is mid-October, depending on prevalence of the COVID-19 virus.

Maryland's funding system protects Baltimore schools from dire cuts in the 2020–21 school year. However, the district expects to take a hit of more than \$400 per pupil for protective gear, facilities cleaning, and other safety measures.

Financial stability has permitted confident planning. Baltimore City Public Schools' reopening plan is clear and accessible. It calls for fully remote learning for the first six weeks of the school year, and then an assessment of whether hybrid learning, with students present in school for some time each week, can begin. Even after hybrid schooling starts, families may opt for continued remote learning.

The criteria for switching to hybrid learning are also clear, based on citywide rates of positive COVID tests, student absenteeism, the absence of hotspots, and rates of decline in positive COVID tests.

*Closing the Distance* also provides detailed examples of students' and teachers' daily schedules under both remote and hybrid learning scenarios, as well as arrangements for attendance taking and grading. It pledges, "We will focus on grade level content as our academic priority, rather than on remediation."

Parents and educators in Baltimore still face many uncertainties. The daily schedules require a great deal of live online instruction, which will tax students and teachers and might exhaust some. But district leaders have done a great deal to make clear commitments and limit uncertainties for parents, teachers, and the broader community.

From a standing start last March, Baltimore developed ways to connect and support students, prepare for online instruction, and introduce hybrid schooling when public health conditions permit. Led by a superintendent who has children in the schools, the district worked hard to prepare parents for the roles they would play and maximized the time students would spend learning. As schools resume this fall, it will seek continuous improvement, both by solving emergent problems and building on exemplars of good teaching. For the future, district leaders will seek to teach effectively online, in hybrid settings, and in traditional schools.

# Chicago Schools Grind into Action: Lessons from Chicago Public Schools' COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

## Chicago Public Schools

*One of the nation's largest districts serves millions of meals and launches an initiative to connect 100,000 students to high-speed internet while improving remote learning throughout the spring.*

### Key lessons:

- Student attendance and effort increase when expectations (e.g., grades) are established and clearly communicated.
- The sheer size and complexity of large urban school districts makes crisis response challenging.
- Districts can strengthen central offices to set clear expectations and provide necessary support to schools while still allowing educators to address diverse needs of specific schools and communities.

**Number of schools: 653**

**Number of students: ~359,000**

**Grades served: PreK-12**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018-2019 school year.*

**Families with income below the poverty level: 27.4%**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2014-2018.*

Chicago, the third-largest school district in the country with 355,000 students and 638 schools, was forced to close its buildings on March 17 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, COVID caseloads were growing rapidly in the city, especially among its low-income populations and residents of color. Chicago students and their families, more than three quarters of whom are low-income and 83 percent of whom are Black or Hispanic, were particularly at risk. By May, Black Chicagoans, who represent 30 percent of the city's population, accounted for 70 percent of its COVID deaths.

District leaders spent the first few weeks of the shutdown preparing paper handout lessons for all students, arranging for families to pick up food at school sites, obtaining laptops and wifi hotspots, and developing a remote learning strategy.

These efforts to meet basic needs and ensure that students received at least some instruction continued throughout the spring, with continual improvements in coordination, resources, and guidance available to schools. Even while trying to serve students in the spring, district leaders started looking toward how they would reopen schools this fall. Over the summer, the district worked to reopen schools with hybrid instruction, but mounting concerns about Chicago's COVID-19 trajectory [fueled concerns about in-person learning](#) and [prompted district leaders](#) to instead begin the new year fully online.

The COVID shutdown in Chicago threatened to interrupt a period of growing success for the district's schools, which were recently found to be improving student outcomes more dramatically than nearly every district in the country.<sup>1</sup> The city's long-term strategy of strengthening individual schools by empowering principals and supporting decentralized problem-solving, combined with districtwide initiatives to make sure high school students stayed on track to graduate, was apparently paying off.<sup>2</sup>

The size and scope of Chicago's central office have been reduced steadily over decades, due both to budget crises and efforts to shift resources and decision-making authority toward schools. As a result, the district office is thinly staffed and has fewer generalists who can easily shift from one activity to another—especially compared to other large urban school systems. Miami-Dade County Public Schools has nearly twice Chicago's central office-to-student staffing ratio. The central office in the Los Angeles Unified School District is more than four times as large on a per-student basis.<sup>3</sup> As a district leader commented, “In a crisis you need a lot of people to drop what they're doing, and some normal activities get deprioritized.”

Chicago's decentralized system was able to quickly respond to some aspects of COVID, but like school districts across the country, the central office has had to learn and adapt its strategy as the crisis deepened and a state-mandated monthlong closure extended through the end of the school year. Leaders needed to adapt emergency structures from other school-year interruptions—such as snow days and an 11-day teacher strike that occurred earlier in the school year—for the longer haul. “We've never had to pull together the EMT [Emergency management team] in this type of capacity before,” a central office leader noted. She continued,

It's usually a one-day type of crisis that happens. So the EMT was really revived, and revamped in a new way to make it sustainable. It became this really cross-functional team, much larger than the original EMT structure. It included the majority of our office

1 Sean Reardon and Rebecca Hinze-Pilar, [Test Score Growth among Chicago Public School Students 2009-2014](#) (Stanford, CA: Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University, 2017).

2 Elaine Allensworth and John Q. Easton, [The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation](#) (Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2005).

3 “Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey,” 2018-19 v.1a; “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 2018-19 v.1a, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD).

of student health and wellness team, for example. So, our Chief Health Officer, and his deputies became part of that team. The facilities team was never really part of EMT, but they're really critical in terms of thinking about building space, and cleaning procedures.

### Quick action on food and connectivity

After the shutdown the district immediately started working with other organizations to make school sites into food distribution centers. In April the district created a family hotline for food and social services issues, manned by a cross-functional team of district staff who could solve some problems immediately. This soon became a 24-7 job for team members. By September, the district had distributed 23 million meals.

Chicago Public Schools CEO Janice Jackson had [stressed the importance](#) of closing the district's technology divide in her previous role as chief education officer. The crisis forced the district to accelerate those efforts. As Jackson [has said](#), "What we now see is that this [technology] is essential for 21st-century education. Post COVID-19, we're going to see access to devices and internet connectivity as important as access to textbooks."

The technology needs were daunting. The district estimated that as many as one in three students are not connected to the internet or are under-connected because of weak wifi or the need to share one device among multiple family members. In response, the district worked with civic organizations on an aggressive computer and tablet distribution program (providing an estimated 170,000 devices by mid-September). Looking ahead, the superintendent announced a plan to provide free high-speed internet to 100,000 students for up to four years.

### Grappling with decentralization

District leaders had five days' notice about the initial school closure last March, which was initially set to last two weeks. The district created hard-copy packets that included two weeks of lessons and activities. A small group had been working on guidance for schools, but the timeline was almost impossible. Unsure of what kinds of instruction schools would be able to mount on their own, and without clear guidance from the state, the district distributed the packets to all students. But as one district leader noted, the packets didn't necessarily line up with what schools were doing:

The [paper] packets were streamlined across the district. And there was the same content [no matter what] school you were in. However, we do not have a unified curriculum . . . so, [packet content] doesn't necessarily align with what that teacher was teaching in their class.

At the onset of the crisis, the district didn't know how many schools had made their own plans, or for that matter how many were able to connect students and teachers electronically. After the turbulent first few weeks, the district was in better communication with individual schools. But it still struggled to make sense of the differences in the software and technology schools were using. As one district administrator said, there was a clear need "to codify and streamline practices across the district:"

We were all trying to figure things out. Some people were using Zoom; some people were using Google, all of which were good options, and people were working extremely hard. But in order for the district to have visibility, and also set goals and plan, we have to make sure that we have consistency in our processes.

Inconsistency across schools wasn't only a problem for district oversight and support. In the early days when schools were essentially on their own, families with children in multiple schools also felt the lack of coordination, especially if they didn't have a working computer or Chromebook for each child. If different schools demanded a child's online attendance at the same time, for example, not everyone could connect.

District-run schools weren't the only ones dealing with Inconsistencies. Chicago's 115 charter schools also differed in how they responded. As district administrators said, most freestanding charters that were not part of larger charter management organizations (CMOs) or networks used whatever guidance the district could provide. But larger CMOs, like the 19-school Noble Street Network, paid attention to the district's plans and guidance but largely went their own way arranging remote learning and modes of student-teacher contact.

### Student participation challenges

Because schools used different technology platforms, the district initially had a hard time monitoring student engagement. [Data released in May](#), based on one online platform, found that 77 percent of Chicago students logged on to access schoolwork online, and almost 85 percent completed at least one graded assignment. But the same survey revealed a gap of more than 15 percentage points between whites and Asians on one hand, and Black students on the other. The gap was 10 points for Latinos. During the week of May 11, one-sixth of all students and one-third of students with disabilities did not log in to remote learning at all. Officials also found that participation rates were dramatically lower for students in the early grades.

In late April the district released new guidance saying that students who failed to submit required class work would receive "incomplete" grades for the spring semester, and that student work could raise grades, but not lower them. In May the numbers of graded assignments completed rose dramatically.

### Fall complicated by uncertainty and politics

Chicago Public Schools worked hard on a plan to offer all students a hybrid learning model, with at least one day each week in school and linked to online learning at other times, but was forced to [abandon that approach in early August](#).

Amid worries about COVID infection rates, parent fears about in-person instruction, and strike threats from the local teachers union, the district announced plans to open fully remote for the fall. City and school district officials [emphasized, including in the local press](#), that public health data drove their decision. And the majority of urban school systems across the country [made similar moves](#) to start the school year fully remote as case counts rose over the summer. The combative union added to the pressures district leaders had to navigate as they prepared to reopen schools.

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the all-remote reopening plan prioritized live instruction:

Students in kindergarten through 12th grade will get at least three hours of live instruction from their teacher. Between that, small group activities with classmates and independent learning, the district is expecting students to “be engaged” for the entire length of a typical school day, Monday through Friday. Other expectations include daily attendance and graded assignments.

New requirements range from 60 minutes of real-time instruction and 90 minutes of learning activities per day for preschoolers to 230 minutes of instruction and 130 minutes of activities for grades six through eight.

District leaders require that all Chicago schools use the same remote learning platform, with options available for schools that want to supplement instruction using other platforms. This facilitates monitoring remote instruction, allows principals to monitor what’s happening in their schools, and gives parents more visibility into what’s expected now and in the future for students.

Once the district committed to a return to an improved and better-coordinated version of online instruction, it faced further union challenges. Union leaders charged that work assignments and schedules were incomplete and confusing to teachers and families. According to its formal grievance:

The Union is demanding that CPS provide educators and students with the infrastructure necessary to conduct remote learning, and the increase of professional development time to allow for training and collaboration with parents, caregivers and students on remote learning best practices.

District leaders do not claim to have solved every problem but hope to be able to identify problems and clarify guidance throughout the fall as remote learning proceeds. Now that school has resumed, district leaders acknowledge that no one can say in advance how many teachers and students will return, how smoothly technical arrangements will work, or whether parents and educators will persevere as problems are sorted out.

More than six months after schools closed last March, Chicago leaders are still grappling with the sheer size and complexity of their district, the educational and health needs of a large needy student population, and the downsides of a decentralization strategy that had produced improvements in normal times. They have gained a new appreciation for the crisis management potential of a strong central office, but do not intend to seek uniformity for its own sake.

# Doing Something Together: Lessons from Green Dot Public Schools’ COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

## Green Dot Public Schools California

A big-city charter network helps students and teachers in Los Angeles navigate the crisis by creating consistency and coherence across schools.

### Key lessons:

- Decisive leadership, clear direction, and organizational coherence are critical in a time of crisis and uncertainty.
- Taking regular feedback from students and teachers, and increasing networkwide collaboration, helped marshal an effective crisis response.
- In the words of the chief academic officer, the crisis “basically has taught us that we can move a lot more quickly on things than we ever thought we could. . . . Let’s not forget that when we’re not in crisis mode because we can probably do things a lot more quickly than we thought.”

**Number of schools: 653**

**Number of schools: 19**

**Number of students: ~11,200**

**Grades served: 6–12**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.*

Like schools across the country, Green Dot Public Schools California closed its campuses in mid-March and kept them closed for the rest of the school year. Early in the crisis, the network focused on distributing food, Chromebooks, and hotspots to its roughly 11,000 students. It conducted wellness checks by phone with all of its families. Over the next six weeks, Green Dot officials said they distributed over 500,000 meals, 8,000 computers, and 1,300 hotspots.



By mid-April, Green Dot launched a remote learning program to provide students access to instruction. The program, according to Green Dot's CEO, was designed to stand up virtual schools "where the adults had a common understanding of what kids need, how they were going to start each class, how they were going to structure the lesson."

As school systems elsewhere carry out remote learning this fall, Green Dot's experience structuring remote learning last spring highlights three important lessons for building a coherent remote learning experience for teachers and students.

### Showing teachers what remote learning looks like

Once it was clear that closures in the spring wouldn't be temporary, Green Dot gave teachers and students clear guidance on what remote learning would look like. The network's CAO said, "It was one thing to say, 'This is what you have to do.' [But then] we quickly mobilized our team centrally to say, 'We need to show people what this looks like.' And so we created an [instructional] model for that first week [of remote learning]."

Green Dot created a networkwide model that combined lessons students could complete on their own schedules, along with access to live teachers on a set bell schedule. The first step was setting clear expectations.

To clarify expectations further, the network developed a shared template for lessons. All lessons had to include slides (Powerpoint or Google Slides) with audio or video from the teacher describing the lesson's objective, standard, agenda, and activities ("so students hear you," the CAO explained). Lessons also had to have a processing activity and an exit slip. Teachers were expected to do biweekly assessments (e.g., quiz, short-answer response, or some other demonstration of learning). In addition to class time, teachers had to be available to students during office hours (teachers did not, however, have to be on video during office hours).

To help teachers with the new model, Green Dot created three "fully loaded" lessons in all core subject areas. These complete lessons included "the PowerPoint, and the audio, and the resources, and all the attachments that [teachers] could process . . . [and] tweak to make their own, and then they could use them to guide their next six weeks," the CAO said. Green Dot took a similarly structured approach to its advisory period, a daily meeting to support students' social and emotional well-being. The CAO explained,

All of our schools have an advisory program as a part of their school day. [During remote schooling] they kept their same advisor, so these are smaller sections of 25 to 30 kids max. . . . We have a team of five people at the home office producing daily lessons for advisory that are a mix, there's a college day, a goal-setting day, a mindfulness day.

Green Dot's centralized, structured approach was based on the belief that the network was "smarter moving as one unit than as 20 different schools, even though we all have unique needs," the CEO said. It also took some burden off educators. The CEO claimed that Green Dot's teachers "appreciated the amount of structure because there was so much they were dealing with in their own homes. The structure allowed them to just wrap their heads around



‘What is this going to look like?’” For students, she added, the consistent structure meant, “‘As a sixth grader, or seventh grader, or eighth grader, when I go into each of my classrooms I [as a student] don’t have to code switch.’”

Unlike most charter school networks, Green Dot’s California schools are voluntarily unionized—so leaders needed to work out any changes with its employees’ collective bargaining representatives. Early in the crisis, the two sides negotiated two “side letters” that outlined teachers’ new workdays and expectations for remote learning (the letters also paused teacher evaluations for the spring). According to network leaders, the consensus on both sides was that everyone wanted to get back to working with students. “That’s not to say there wasn’t a good amount of back and forth [with the union],” the CEO observed. “But I think ultimately, we landed with just about everything we thought was important for students and for staff, and so we feel good about that.”

### Support and align teacher and system learning

Besides the “fully loaded” lessons and template, Green Dot’s central office provided teachers with eight days of professional development on remote learning before launching their virtual schools. Each day followed a similar schedule, opening with community-building activities, followed by a training module (e.g., on the remote learning lessons or an opportunity to rehearse leading a virtual advisory or get up to speed on cyber safety) and then planning time for teachers.

To support the transition to virtual schooling, Green Dot also phased in remote learning by including a “Week 0” of advisory classes only. This advisory-first approach emphasized the importance of social-emotional connections—and gave teachers more breathing room to adjust to their new roles and manage personal situations at home.

Besides training teachers to prepare for remote learning, Green Dot also started working with researchers at UCLA to collect data from teachers and students about their experiences. Weekly surveys went to teachers, staff, and students. Teacher and student focus groups provided further feedback. As the CEO said,

It’s just a way to get great ideas. Every time I go through this feedback process, somebody says something and I’m like, ‘I never thought of that before. Let’s put that on the list of things that we want to do.’

By showing teachers what remote learning looked like, providing aligned professional development, and collecting data to inform improvement, Green Dot was able to roll out and adapt its remote learning program across all of its schools.

While it was a work in progress, the approach helped harmonize the network’s remote learning effort—instruction, teacher training, student support, and data collection. Green Dot’s attempts at harmonization echoed the type of instructional program coherence known to support student learning and some of the predictability and consistency associated with trauma-informed approaches.

## Increased collaboration and coordination across the organization

Green Dot's experience last spring shows what a structured and coherent approach to remote learning can look like. But getting there wasn't easy. It required extra levels of coordination and collaboration throughout the organization.

In the central office, responding to the crisis “really amplified” central office collaboration, according to the CAO. With events moving quickly, changes in one department had immediate ripple effects on others. Those ripple effects continued as the network planned for reopening in the fall. The CAO said,

Our task force for reopening schools is an example. There are probably 20 of us on that, across different departments . . . [while] there are people who literally might have nothing to contribute in an hour and a half meeting, they need to hear how everything is developing with this model because it's going to impact your plans for your department.

At the school level, principals started working together more closely, too. The CAO noted,

The cross-departmental collaboration at the home office is true at the school site level, too. Our principals are collaborating more than they did six months ago. And it's not because they didn't have things to share. It's just something about this environment and this shift has increased communication school to school, leader to leader, the same way it has at the home office.

Ironically, working remotely may have increased connections across the organization. Pre-COVID, for example, the traffic in Los Angeles made it hard to imagine gathering people together across the system. “To hop in a car in LA to get the group of principals together is very difficult,” admitted the CAO. But virtual meetings broke down that barrier. “I think we need to change the way we think about how we convene people after all is said and done. . . . There's nothing wrong with virtual meetups on a regular basis.”

## Remote learning in fall 2020

In August, Green Dot California opened schools with full-day, remote learning for the 2020–21 school year. Its approach to reopening carried forward many of the strategies it used in the spring: setting clear expectations, providing aligned support, and collaborating. But the network also changed and improved its model based on lessons from the spring.

The biggest change: the network is offering full-day live instruction and interactive lessons. This shift to live instruction was, in part, a response to feedback from students last spring. At that time, the CAO said, “Students are telling us, ‘That's important to me. I learn better when those two things [I can see and hear my teacher] are true at the same time.’” Teachers this fall will also take attendance every day. Students will receive traditional A–F grades. And parents will have access to assignments and grades throughout the school year. In other words, remote learning will look a little more like regular school.

To be sure, Green Dot's success last spring may have been a matter of scale: Would a structured approach have worked with more schools? Would it have been successful with a mix of elementary and secondary schools, instead of only middle and high schools? And despite

some successes, leaders admitted that questions remained last spring about how the program could better provide feedback to students, build opportunities to master standards, and serve students with disabilities and English language learners.

Still, the network managed to deliver the kind of structure and support that many teachers across the country say they wanted during a challenging time. It illustrates the benefits of leadership, direction, and organizational coherence in a time of crisis and uncertainty. And it's a proof point that, with leadership and collaboration, complex organizations can make major changes in short periods of time. As the CAO said, Green Dot's response to the crisis in the spring "basically has taught us that we can move a lot more quickly on things than we ever thought we could. . . . Let's not forget that when we're not in crisis mode because we can probably do things a lot more quickly than we thought."

As the virus surges, budgets tighten, and uncertainty remains, system leaders will need to stay nimble in the months ahead.

# Our Families Need Us. This is What We Do: Lessons from LEARN Charter School Network's COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

## LEARN Charter Schools

*A charter school network serving the Chicago area finds social support and improved communication are crucial to connecting with families during remote learning.*

### Key lessons:

- Build and deepen relationships, dedicate specialized staff and resources to provide social support for and communication with families.
- Support families and build relationships, deploy teachers to help in areas of need (e.g., extending special education teacher roles).
- Build student-to-student relationships, design virtual opportunities for students to meet and socialize.
- Build student-to-teacher relationships and reinforce expectations, explore opportunities for socially distant in-person contact with teachers—even in schools with online models.

**Number of schools: 10**

**Number of students: ~4,000**

**Grades served: PreK–8**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.*

After Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker issued a temporary school closure last March because of COVID-19, leaders at the LEARN Charter School Network got busy thinking about what remote learning would look like; they had a track record of performance to safeguard. Pre-COVID, the 20-year-old Chicago-area charter school network of 10 college-prep K–8 schools consistently

outperformed nearby neighborhood public schools. A quarter of its students gained admission to Chicago's elite, selective-enrollment high schools. These results were all the more impressive given that LEARN's students were predominantly students of color from low-income households who were typically underserved by the system at large.

But translating LEARN's academic program to remote learning wasn't the network's first or only agenda item last spring. It was also focused on ensuring the well-being of its students and families during a period of uncertainty and turmoil. As school districts across the country considered the prospect of a school year dominated by remote learning, LEARN's experience last spring shows how even small systems can support and connect with families and students during unprecedented and unpredictable times. Social workers, special education staff, and staff as a whole banded together to attend to students' social-emotional well-being and ensure that their basic needs were being met. These supports also helped the network address technical and communication challenges it faced with its families. The network connected students to services and supports, marshaled new resources to support families, and created systems to streamline parent communication. As a result, LEARN strengthened its connections as a community during the pandemic.

### Coordinating nonacademic support for families

Early in the crisis, LEARN reached out to all of the families it served by conducting "LEARN Wellness Calls," an all-hands-on-deck project to determine families' needs during the pandemic. A school leader explained,

We used everybody in our building to contact the parents. Everybody had a caseload of about seven or eight families. Some of our staff members were not full-time teachers, so they weren't planning lessons and so they had larger caseloads.

These early calls with parents were not about learning and academics. As educators logged the calls in a shared spreadsheet, they realized families were facing a lot of "emotional and financial stress," a school leader noted. Indeed, "The first week or two," recalled LEARN's CEO, "was about really urgent needs: Who needs food? Who needs medicine? Who needs cleaning supplies?"

These were pressing issues. [Low-income workers in Chicago were hit hard](#) by the pandemic. According to data from Opportunity Insights, the employment rate among these workers was down 41 percent in May 2020 compared to January 2020. By May, [Black Chicagoans represented 70 percent of people killed by COVID-19](#), despite comprising only 30 percent of the city's population. That same month, the Chicago Urban League released a report titled [An Epidemic of Inequities: Structural Racism and COVID-19 in the Black Community](#).

As LEARN made connections with its families, it used its team of school-based social workers to coordinate help. These specialists were part of LEARN's model pre-pandemic—a reflection of the network's dual emphasis on social-emotional support and academic rigor. "The social worker has got to receive information of family needs immediately," explained a network leader. "Then it was: email sent, and then immediately, services went out that day. We took them directly to families' homes, those homes with urgent needs."

To provide extra help, the network also launched a special fund for its families, soliciting direct donations and other contributions (e.g., Amazon Smile). By April 21 the fund had raised over \$73,000 and provided direct resources to 326 families. A teacher fund was also launched to provide financial support to staff.

Besides providing food and other assistance, LEARN's school-based social workers ensured that students got individualized attention, including "grade-specific activities, and messages, and social skills practice to do at home," the Managing Director of Teaching & Learning (MDTL) explained. "We have several social workers across the network that took initiative," she continued. "At one of our elementary schools, the social worker started to utilize one of our family communication mechanisms to do a daily message and family social-emotional activity."

As systems across the country continue to take on an expanded role supporting families in need, if specialized teams—like LEARN's social workers, counselors, or paraprofessionals—can focus on building and maintaining connections with families, it will take some of the burden off teachers and school leaders to coordinate nonacademic support to families.

### **Making virtual school more doable**

LEARN's communication with families—by phone and Google Classroom—also highlighted challenges that made virtual schooling difficult for parents and students. For example, early in the crisis LEARN found that many of its parents struggled with the technical demands of remote learning. Surveys suggested some problems with internet access, but the biggest problem was often confusion: LEARN's mix of technology solutions included multiple programs and logins that made it difficult for parents to help their children access remote learning.

In response, some teachers and site-based administrators provided one-on-one coaching to parents who needed help with technology. As the MDTL reflected, "Teachers talked about how it was challenging, but they did sit on the phone and talk parents through: How are you going to get on the computer? How do you log in? Those things took folks a lot of time."

One of the network's first family surveys revealed that the amount of communication coming from school was overwhelming parents. "Parents were receiving phone calls from multiple teachers in one day," the network's MDTL remembered. School leaders immediately responded to systematize teacher-parent communication by creating shared logs of the last contact with each family.

LEARN also coordinated the way it provided special education services to streamline and improve support to students during remote learning. Its special education teachers still worked in ways that were similar prior to the pandemic, albeit virtually. They ran sessions with small groups, or joined larger lessons to help teachers support students. But they also took on a new role as the main point of contact for their students' entire families.

Being the main point of contact streamlined communication but also helped special education teachers provide support to their students. "We made sure that one [special education] teacher [was the point of contact for] multiple children from a family," explained a principal. "So even

if the child was [general education] and another child in the family was [special education], the [special education] teacher had that family as their contact.”

The new connections had other benefits. As a school leader explained,

We found that a lot of times when we're giving the [special education] services, such as occupational therapy and speech services, when parents were not available, teachers needed to get creative and work with older siblings. Especially with the younger kids.

Engaging general education students in their own schoolwork was challenging in its own right, especially for older students. Part of the problem could have been that Chicago Public Schools suspended all grades in the spring. According to LEARN teachers, the suspension of grading sent the message that “this basically doesn't count,” said one teacher. “That made it much more challenging to encourage parents, as well as students, to participate.” But on the other hand, middle school students were also sometimes self-conscious about engaging virtually with their peers, according to a school leader. Students think, “If I make a mistake, everybody's seeing it because everybody can see me now,” she said.

To help students become more comfortable online and stay connected, one school leader organized Google Hangouts for students to connect every week. “They did a hangout three times a week with the middle school kids, where kids could just get online and play games together,” she explained. “Not everybody would show up for the hangout, but the kids who really needed that definitely showed up for the hangout.”

## Our families need us

As school systems resume instruction in a time likely dominated by remote learning and further economic hardship, LEARN's experience last spring underscores the importance of leveraging relationships and social supports—from its team of social workers to its special educators—to engage with families, identify their needs, and connect them with resources and other supports. “Our families need us,” said the network's CEO. “This is what we do.”

For the current school year, LEARN is using remote learning from August until October. It's also continuing to engage with families. For example, to help support remote learning, LEARN hosted mandatory in-person orientations for new and returning parents and their children. During these meetings, families and students met their teachers face-to-face, learned about the network's remote learning program and curriculum, and reviewed health and safety protocols. As part of the orientation, students took an academic assessment so their teachers and schools have a better sense of where they are academically, including any learning lost in the spring. Families also learned how to access LEARN's Single Sign On system, which centralizes remote learning and improves student and family experience by alleviating confusion over multiple logins and passwords.

LEARN's instructional vision for remote learning this year was informed by regular surveys administered to families, students, and staff—something it plans to continue so that it can evolve and refine its approach throughout the year. LEARN provided extended professional development over the summer to teachers about online engagement strategies, personalized learning, social-emotional learning, and other technology tools (e.g., Go Guardian). This

fall, all LEARN schools have 100 percent one-to-one technology, with all students receiving Chromebooks for remote instruction. Knowing that all students have access to computers allowed LEARN to make instructional decisions differently than in previous years. For example, LEARN will use Amplify Science and Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts to offer more personalized learning to students this school year.

Looking back to the spring, one school leader reflected that LEARN's efforts to connect with families helped solidify bonds and relationships throughout the organization, not just with parents. She said,

Our [school-based] teams were very, very close. They became close. They became close with the parents as well. So this was actually a blessing in disguise when it came to creating community within the school. We already had a strong community, but this increased it 100-fold.

Dedicated teams and resources like LEARN's, coupled with a high degree of communication, can help schools build and maintain connections and support the well-being of students and families. As the pandemic and its disruptions to normal life carry on throughout the fall, the need to connect with and support families will remain. But if hardships increase (as public budgets contract), states and the federal government will likely need to provide additional resources, and districts and charter school networks will need to work with other social service providers to meet the needs of students and families this fall and beyond.



# Keeping Learning on Track in a Crisis: Lessons from Roaring Fork School District's COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

## Roaring Fork School District

*A diverse rural district high in the Colorado Rocky Mountains took care of families first, then focused instruction on a common curriculum of essentials.*

### Key lessons:

- Providing support to families can remove barriers to learning.
- Increasing centralized curriculum coordination can balance educator autonomy with the need to collaborate across schools and teacher teams.
- The pandemic and the switch to online communication drove parents to engage with their student's schools, and the learning process itself, in new ways that school systems should hold onto after the crisis passes.

**Number of schools: 13**

**Number of students: ~5,700**

**Grades served: PreK-12**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018-2019 school year.*

**Families with income below the poverty level: 6.7%**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2014-2018.*

The Roaring Fork School District stretches along a river of the same name in the Rocky Mountains. Its 13 schools are nestled in valleys about an hour's drive from two of Colorado's high-end resort towns—Aspen and Vail—where many parents work seasonal jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced officials to shut down ski slopes and empty hotels and restaurants, leaving many households without income. At its worst, in late April and early May, wages of low-income workers had dropped by 30 percent in Garfield County and 70 percent in Eagle County,<sup>1</sup> the two counties served by the district.

<sup>1</sup> "Economic Tracker," Opportunity Insights Track the Recovery website (based on data from Earnin and Homebase and reported in the July 17 update).

Almost 30 percent of residents are Hispanic, and they have been disproportionately affected by the virus. By late summer, almost 2,000 residents in these counties had tested positive for COVID-19, which, given their small size, makes these counties among the hardest-hit in the state of Colorado.<sup>2</sup> Federal data prior to the pandemic [estimated that 87 percent of households](#) in the area had broadband internet, which meant that some students likely would not have reliable access at home.

When the governor closed the state's schools to fight the pandemic, Roaring Fork focused on meeting the needs of families first, but never lost sight of the instruction students could not afford to miss.

The district started by reaching out to ensure families had their basic needs covered and students had the tools they needed to start learning. Meanwhile, the instructional team focused on building centralized units of study, which reduced the burden on teachers who were now expected to deliver instruction differently, and the potential for variation across teachers and schools. This helped district leaders ensure all students would cover material they needed to start the next school year on track, and also created structures for collaboration that leaders hope to hold onto after the pandemic passes.

### Prioritizing the well-being of students and families

The small district's family services team is bilingual and bicultural and serves as a liaison between families and schools. It collaborates with educators and serves as parents' advocates in the school system. In the first few weeks after school closures, the superintendent said, "We decided at first to take care of people rather than jump right away to academic learning." He explained,

Our first order of business was checking in on families, and making sure people had appropriate information, that they were getting information about what was going on with the schools, that they had access to economic resources, that if folks were . . . some people were immediately losing jobs.

The district, like others across the country, quickly mobilized to provide food assistance to students and their families, and quietly wielded its political influence to make sure it could support families that could not prove citizenship.

After spring break the family services team began a two-week push to reach every one of the district's 4,600 families by phone. They referred between 400 and 500 families to community organizations for assistance, which stepped up to provide a drive-through food delivery system using school buses. Together they distributed up to 1,200 meals per day, sending tote bags of food home for weekends. The family services team continued working closely with 1,500 families through the spring—a 50 percent increase over the previous year's caseload.

<sup>2</sup> "COVID-19 United States Cases by County," Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center website (data reported are as of August 17, 2020).

Before the pandemic, the district had already assigned every student in grades 3 through 12 a Chromebook, and teachers already had some experience with Google Classroom. The family services team helped to identify any remaining students who still needed devices or internet access. The district reached an agreement with Comcast to provide service to families. It also worked with a community partner who would walk families through setting up access and partnered with organizations to provide broadband access in high-density housing areas, such as apartment complexes and mobile home parks.

The district referred eligible families to WIC and TNF for support and provided rental assistance to others using money the district and community organizations raised. By summer the team distributed \$150,000 in assistance to families.

As the superintendent noted, the slow start of instruction didn't sit well with many families who saw neighboring districts, including wealthier resort towns, launch academic work right away.

But the support-first strategy paid off as students re-engaged for remote learning: student attendance was better during the pandemic than in the previous school year.

### **Balancing tight and loose to ensure learning continues**

District leaders initially took a dim view of remote learning. The chief academic officer stated bluntly: "The instructional methodology that we were left with was lacking most of the things that we believe are highly effective in instruction." They knew learning would suffer without face-to-face interactions among students and teachers. Nonetheless, they felt they had to find a way to help teachers deliver instruction—including new content—as effectively as they possibly could under the circumstances.

Their solution was to get tighter on curricula, set a few ground rules, and then allow teachers to use the strategies and approaches they felt would best reach their students. The superintendent said this challenged his long-standing belief in decentralization, but he viewed some tightening as necessary:

We didn't want to just say okay, teachers, go figure it out. We wanted to say okay, teachers, we've identified this preferred platform. We've identified this preferred curriculum format.

District leaders developed a six-week unit for each grade and subject. During the two weeks immediately following spring break, teacher-led, content-based teams reviewed the curricula for the rest of the school year, identified the essential elements that students would need to start on grade level next fall, and developed units of study that would ensure every student could learn this must-have material.

District leaders then set the expectation that teachers would administer the designed unit, taking them to the end of the school year. The district also set a grading policy that limited how much a student's grade could drop during the closure. High school students would retain their third-quarter grade if they showed competency in the final quarter. If they failed to show

competency, their grade could only be reduced by one level. As the superintendent explained, “We wanted much more emphasis on formative feedback, really deemphasizing grading, and really deemphasizing mistakes.”

The district launched formal instruction, but it eschewed real-time teaching. It wanted to make remote instruction easier for teachers, many of whom had children at home, and to maximize flexibility for parents and students. Teachers provided students and parents with a “week-at-a-glance” resource that outlined the material and assignments teachers expected students to cover each week. Teachers established “office hours” during which they would be available to help students. Crew—advisory groups in which students meet with a teacher to focus on nonacademic matters and build relationships—continued to meet in live, in 20- to 30-minute sessions. Lead teachers hosted some live lessons, but the district did not require students to attend.

To support teachers, the district designated Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons for professional development and co-planning.

Teachers initially bristled at the notion of delivering common units. The CAO explained that they eventually won teachers’ support for the centralized curricula by emphasizing that common units would allow teachers to easily hand off their classes if they became ill themselves, and would ensure greater equity by making it easier for specialists to adapt curriculum for students with disabilities and English language learners.

Some teachers also felt that pulling back on formal grading left them with few options for incentivizing students to engage. Students, parents, and teachers alike felt that students did not have enough productive access to teachers via office hours and spent too little time in live instruction. In a survey of more than 2,300 students, parents, and teachers conducted just a few weeks into remote learning, 61 percent of teachers reported that they had seen fewer than one in five of their students in office hours. Only 27 percent of students reported that their remote learning lessons were “quite or extremely helpful.” While the majority of students and parents (68 and 76 percent, respectively) felt that students completed their assignments, only 15 percent of teachers reported that most of their students submitted their work. These results prompted district leaders to shorten teacher office hours, but increase their frequency, and to ramp up the amount of live teaching.

Finally, the CAO noted that the strong bond the district sought to build between teachers and students had frayed with remote learning. He noted that students and teachers with good pre-existing relationships weathered remote learning better than those with weak relationships. For the fall he acknowledged that he and faculty would need to figure how to establish and sustain student-teacher and teacher-administrator relationships, even as remote learning continued.

### Lessons for this fall

Roaring Fork started this fall with fully remote learning. At the time of our interviews in June, however, district leaders were planning for both fully remote and hybrid contingencies.

As summer started, childcare was a preeminent concern. By the end of July, unemployment claims in these counties had dropped to nearly pre-pandemic levels.<sup>3</sup> Parents are back to work—for many that means 60- to 90-minute commutes to their jobs in resort towns, taking them away from home for long stretches of the day and unable to help their children with schoolwork. To prepare for schools' reopening, the district reached out to community partners who are organizing childcare providers in the region.

District leaders felt that they would need to get even tighter with instruction, have more materials ready to present, and work more closely together. In early June, district content leaders joined the district's operations and administrative teams to set the basic outline of the fall plan. Principals then sorted out how to operationalize those plans for their schools. The district shared information and sought feedback on a rolling basis from parents.

The district content teams mapped out weekly and quarterly learning goals by grade and subject. Instruction would begin on grade level. The teachers who convened for the district's Summer Academy—an annual summer professional development opportunity—designed units for the fall. The district concluded the summer in August by engaging all staff in a week of planning. Formative assessment would be used to help guide instruction and support.

## Looking beyond the pandemic

Each of the district leaders we interviewed spoke of lessons that will carry beyond the immediate crisis.

**Leverage community partnerships.** Before the pandemic, Roaring Fork was committed to supporting families to remove barriers to learning. The superintendent said the district was already looking at ways to form partnerships with community organizations that could help provide children health care and other essential services to students:

Our schools in any community are uniquely positioned. They're trusted, they're central, they're everywhere, and so we should be using the infrastructure we offer—whether it's our facilities, transportation, or simply, our access to kids.

In some ways, he said, the pandemic “has been an accelerator of that vision.”

**Engage parents.** During the crisis, parents connected with schools in new ways. Shifting parent meetings to a virtual format increased participation. And supporting their students at home thrust many parents directly into the learning process for the first time.

The district's family services director wondered if there might be ways to sustain both forms of parent engagement after the crisis passes:

It melts your heart to see these stories of resilience, and parents that were like, ‘I never was interested in my kid's school learning, and now I'm doing it right there with them, and we've got a system, and I'm really proud of what I've done.’

<sup>3</sup> “Economic Tracker,” Opportunity Insights Track the Recovery website (based on data from the Department of Labor and reported in the August 14 update).

***To ensure quality curriculum, balance centralized resources with educator autonomy.*** The urge to centralize in a crisis is natural. A crisis demands speed and certainty in decision-making. Centralizing curriculum, however, runs against strong traditions of teacher autonomy, which had long flourished in Roaring Fork. District leaders made the somewhat unpopular choice to centralize planning of a common curriculum to help ensure all students would finish the school year prepared to continue grade-level work in the fall.

The superintendent noted that though he has generally favored decentralization, centralizing some lesson planning helped ensure students received essential material during a crisis. It also helped encourage collaboration among teachers in the same grade or subject in different schools and made it easier for bilingual and special education teachers to participate in that collaboration. According to him, the question is: Can they sustain that cross-team collaboration? Or will the district's previous tradition of educator autonomy overtake it when the crisis passes?

### More than getting by

The superintendent concluded his interview by noting that he never doubted that his administrators and teachers would be able to handle the enormous task put before them last spring, but he also noted that this crisis will continue to affect the school system, perhaps for a very long time:

I felt like we were always going to be alright, and we would always navigate this as well as we could, make a lot of mistakes, and course-correct along the way. I just keep looking at it that way. I don't think that this is a tunnel we're going to come through and say, 'Oh, we're back to daylight.' We're just going to continue to navigate this.

In the near term, Roaring Fork will continue to support families and stay focused on curriculum. Over the longer term, leaders in the district hope that Roaring Fork schools emerge from the pandemic with a lasting commitment to unity in curriculum, building on parents' newfound understanding of and confidence in their children's learning, and expanding their community partnerships to provide even more comprehensive and coherent support to the community.