# 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.[1] 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.[2]

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.[3] 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

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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).

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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:"

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> 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.
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> 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.

## 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.

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