

# 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.

## | 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.

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