COLORADO CHARTER SCHOOL EQUITY PROJECT

Access and Equity in Education for All Students in the Age of COVID-19

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In Spring 2020, nearly all school buildings in the country were abruptly closed in the wake of the novel coronavirus. At least 97 percent of students (55.1 million of 57 million) were affected by school closures.[1] School and district leaders were forced to shift to a largely unfamiliar mode of teaching. In some cases, schools closed outright or provided minimal remote instruction. In other cases, students continued to receive regular instruction through online platforms. Parents and caregivers became de facto teachers, particularly for younger learners who need assistance with online learning. In 48 of 50 states, officials ordered or recommended that the school closures stay in place from March through the end of the academic school year.[2]

The summer break brought a flurry of reopening plans from school districts and individual schools. In Colorado, the state deferred to local communities, including the state's 178 school districts. This has been the typical practice nationwide. According to data collected by *Education Week*, 39 of 50 states did not issue a statewide order concerning school reopening and instead have deferred to local school districts who have to make their own decisions about whether and how to offer in-person instruction.[3]

Deferring decisions to reopen schools to the local level has challenges and benefits. One advantage is that it allows for different areas to take different approaches based on their local context. In Colorado, for example, some rural areas of the state have experienced low COVID-19 case rates and are able to safely return to in person instruction, while other areas are continuing with remote learning. The challenge with placing decision-making at the local level is that it also places a burden on school district leaders and charter school leaders to become health experts. As is described in the Colorado case studies included in this report, leaders now spend the majority of their time tracking case rates, developing and shifting protocols for in-person and hybrid learning, and communicating with schools and families.

Local decision making also has the potential to create inequitable access and outcomes. In the Denver metro area, some school districts decided to return to full-time, in-person classes for at least elementary students, while other districts choose to be fully remote for the start of the school year. These school districts are operating under the same local health department guidance but made different decisions, as they were entitled to under Colorado's local control framework. Notably, one school district that started the school year in person serves predominately white and affluent students, while another school district that started all classes remotely (and has remained remote) serves mostly Hispanic and low-income students.[4] This phenomenon is not unique to the Denver area. According to an analysis

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[1] [Map: Coronavirus and School Closures in 2019-2020](), *Education Week,* 2020.

[2] Ibid.

[3] [Map: Where are Schools Closed?](), *Education Week,* Updt. Nov. 13, 2020.

[4] Adams 14 [Letter from Acting Superintendent Don Rangel Regarding Remote Learning.]() October, 14, 2020.

"[Full In Person Learning (K-5)]()", Cherry Creek School District. August, 7, 2020.

conducted by *Chalkbeat* and the *Associated Press* (AP), this trend can be observed across the country.[5] Their analysis of survey results from 677 school districts found that the percentage of white students in a district is positively correlated with the likelihood that in-person classes are offered, across urban, suburban and rural areas. *AP/Chalkbeat* note that districts with a large majority of white students are more than three times likely as districts serving predominantly minority students to be offering in-person instruction. According to the survey, at the start of the school year, 21 percent of Hispanic students and 25 percent of Black students had the option of in-person learning, compared with 49 percent of white students. The analysis states that the difference in learning environments may reflect some level of parent preference. Families of color have been harder hit by COVID-19 and are less likely to have access to health care, which contributes to more hesitation to return to in-person schooling.[6] At the same time, the disparate access to in-person instruction is likely to expand educational achievement gaps.

Localized decision making has special implications for charter schools in Colorado. Eighty five percent of the state's 255 charter schools are authorized by the local school districts in which they operate (15 percent are authorized by the Colorado Charter School Institute). Although locally authorized charter schools are independently governed and operated and are allowed by state law to waive many district and some state policies, they remain subject to their authorizing district's policies and oversight regarding the health, safety, and well-being of students.

This report focuses on the impact of COVID-19, with a particular focus on charter schools and vulnerable populations. The report offers strategies and insights from researchers and school leaders.

Impact of COVID-19 on Students

While it is not possible to predict to what degree the pandemic will harm the long-term prospects of students, there is widespread concern that the effects will be significant. For some students, learning losses may be so severe that they cannot be recouped, which means students will struggle to meet grade level standards, graduate from high school and pursue a postsecondary education. Many of these students experiencing a loss of learning and skills now will see lower economic productivity and wages for the duration of their lives.[7]

The OECD has estimated that the United States faces a future economic loss of at least $15.3 trillion due to the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector.[8] Hanushek and Woessman (2020) modeled this long-term economic impact based on past research on education disruptions and the corresponding loss

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[5] Belsha, K; Rubinkam, M; LaMarr LeMee, G; and Fenn L. (Sept. 11, 2020). A nationwide divide: Hispanic and Black students more likely than white students to start the year online. *Chalkbeat* and *The Associated Press*.

[6] Barnum, M and Bryan, C. (Jul. 14, 2020). Despite stress of closures, most parents wary of rush to return to school buildings, polls show. *Chalkbeat.*

[7] Hanushek, E. and L. Woessmann (2020), "The economic impacts of learning losses", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 225, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/21908d74-en.

[8] Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020.

in skills and economic productivity. Their model assumed that schools were only disrupted in spring 2020, and that schools across the country would return to normal in fall 2020. Schools, however, are far from operating at a "normal" level with over half of the country's public schools continuing with remote learning.[9] Even if most schools are doing much better with remote learning in the fall than they did in the spring, it is highly likely that learning losses are still being incurred, or at the very least, are not being remedied from the spring loss. Thus, the model presented by Hanushek and Woessman (2020) is a conservative estimate. The number of students who will see a lifelong negative impact is likely going to be much higher and economic growth losses will be accordingly bigger.[10]

In terms of short-term learning losses, some researchers are projecting that students will have the biggest struggle staying on track in math. Relying on prior research on summer learning loss, researchers estimate that students likely started school this fall "with approximately 63-68% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year and with 37-50% of the learning gains in math" (Kuhfeld et. al, 2020, 2).[11] In other words, students may have lost up to half a year of math learning due to school closures in the spring. On a positive note, the researchers note that learning losses are not universal and that the top third of students may have gained ground in reading during the spring due to the fact that reading is typically a skill that parents are most comfortable working on with their children.[12]

High school completion is another area that will be negatively impacted by the virus-induced school closures. High school principals are reporting that some of their students have already been lost and may never return to school to earn their diploma. The precise impact on high school dropout rates is yet to be seen, but some estimates project that over 24 million students worldwide will drop out of school due to pandemic-induced school closures.[13]

Additionally, schools provide far more than academic instruction. For many students, schools are where they receive critical health and nutrition services, including immunizations and meals. Students with special needs receive numerous services through their schools including speech, occupational and physical therapy, behavioral and mental health services, and language acquisition support. It is particularly difficult to provide these services when school buildings are closed. Nonetheless, schools across the United States have made enormous efforts to continue providing critical services to students and families.

In March and April 2020, for example, many school districts focused on developing strategies to distribute meals to students who had relied on schools for their breakfast and lunch. STRIVE Prep,

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[9] Gross, B; Opalka, A.; and Gundapaneni, P. (2020). Getting Back to School: An Update on Plans from Across the Country. Center on Reinventing Public Education.

[10] Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020.

[11] Kuhfeld, Megan, James Soland, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, and Jing Liu. (2020). Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. (EdWorkingPaper: 20-226). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/cdrv-yw05

[12] Kuhfeld, et al., 2020.

[13] UNICEF Press Conference, September 15, 2020.

featured in the case study section of this report, raised over $100,000 for a Crisis Relief Fund to support their families in need. In Fall 2020, many schools have prioritized opening school buildings for students with special needs, including students with disabilities and English language learners, so that those students can receive in-person instruction and services even if the rest of the school is still operating remotely.[14] Even with doors open to students with special needs, families are opting to keep their students home since children with disabilities are more likely to be in a high risk category for COVID-19. Similarly, a majority of the country's English language learners are Latino, which is another group being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 rates. With families choosing to continue with remote learning, schools must find ways to provide services while acknowledging that the effectiveness of those virtual services is not going to be as good as in person.

Inequitable Impact
The students most likely to be affected by these long-term losses in learning, skills and wages, are those students who are already traditionally underserved. This has implications not only for children in the United States, but for children across the globe. The UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore gave remarks in September 2020 about updated guidance on school operations during COVID-19. Fore stated:

> "We know that closing schools for prolonged periods of time can have devastating consequences for children. They become more exposed to physical and emotional violence. Their mental health is affected. They are more vulnerable to child labor and sexual abuse, and are less likely to break out of the cycle of poverty. For the most marginalized, missing out on school -- even if only for a few weeks -- can lead to negative outcomes that last a lifetime."[15]

Vulnerable students are facing challenges on multiple fronts, having to navigate poverty, racism, food insecurity alongside a new learning model that is dependent on having reliable internet and a safe and quiet space to learn. Wealthier students are more likely to have parents supporting their learning, access to tutoring and enrichment, and more stable and safe home environments. As a report by the OECD on the impact of COVID-19 on education explains: "Students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents and eager and able to learn, could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remained shut out when their schools shut down (2020, 4).[16] The pandemic has shed a light on the many existing inequities in our education system, which go beyond the digital divide to a fundamental misalignment between student needs and resources.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities also calls attention to the fact that vulnerable populations are likely to face multiple, intersecting challenges that are being exacerbated by COVID-19. The NCLD writes:

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[14] Mitchell, C., (Aug. 7, 2020) Students in Special Education, English Learners May Go Back to Class First. Here's Why. *Education Week.*

[15] UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore's remarks at a press conference on new updated guidance on school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19. September, 15, 2020.

[16] OECD, The Impact of COVID-19 on Education.

> "This crisis, while experienced by all learners, is heightened for students with disabilities, students whose home language is not English, students who are Black and/or have other marginalized racial and ethnic identities students who are from low-income families, and those who face instability in their home learning environments. When these facets of young people's identities intersect, they can present opportunities and risks for deeper social, emotional, and mental health needs. These needs must be understood and addressed through active conversation and collaboration with students and their families." (2020, 1)[17]

It will not be sufficient to work on meeting a student's needs through an IEP if that same student is also struggling with food insecurity or systemic racism. The NCLD urges schools to implement educational models that build on students' different strengths while intentionally addressing their unique and intersecting needs. An NCLD brief outlines several strategies for school leaders including using culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, developing a proactive and intentional strategy to engage families of students with disabilities and marginalized youth, and building the capacity of all school staff to integrate academic, social and emotional development into learning environments.[18]

Legal Considerations for Students with Special Needs

The rapid wave of school closures in March 2020 resulted in many questions from the field regarding legal obligations to serve students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), which requires schools to provide individualized instruction to meet students' needs, does not specifically address what local education agencies (LEAs) are expected to do if schools are closed due an emergency. The guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education in March 2020 stated that if an LEA is providing instruction to the general student population during a school closure, than the LEA is required to ensure equal access to that instruction for students with disabilities, which includes the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE).[19] The U.S. Department of Education guidance calls on states, LEAs, and schools to ensure that, "to the greatest extent possible," students with disabilities have access to the services identified in the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan.[20] Schools may offer special education services in a virtual format if appropriate. If face-to-face interaction was deemed necessary in the spring but it could not be provided, schools had the option to postpone services until school reopened. Federal guidance dictates that the LEA and school should determine on an individualized basis whether to offer compensatory services to make up for the lack of services provided in the spring and to compensate for skills that were lost during the disruption.

According to Paul O'Neill, Co-Founder of the National Center on Special Education in Charter Schools, the federal guidance in the spring that allowed LEAs to defer compensatory services might have been a

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[17] National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), Actions for Impact: A School Leader's Guide to Centering Systemically Marginalized Students During COVID-19, 2020.

[18] NCLD, 2020.

[19] U.S. Department of Education, Questions and answers on providing services to children with disabilities during the coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak, March 2020.

[20] Ibid., page 2.

practical solution if schools were only closed for a month or so.[21] Instead, schools were closed for three months in the spring, and a majority of students are still in remote learning in fall 2020.[22] This creates a new set of challenges for schools that need to provide compensatory services to a number of students to make up for services that were not provided in the spring while still having to navigate a virtual setting and provide equitable access to the general education program this academic year. The hurdles facing schools include high costs for providing a back log of services, shortage of staff to provide such services, and, for charter schools authorized by traditional school districts, negotiations over providers and funding. Further, O'Neil, points out that families and schools can only fit so much into their schedules. If students are trying to make up lost hours of speech therapy, for example, there is a limit to how many extra hours of therapy both families and schools can fit into their weekly schedules.[23]

Given this context, many schools have prioritized opening school buildings this fall for in-person learning for students with special needs, including students with disabilities and English language learners, even if the rest of the school is still operating remotely.[24] Because special education students are likely to have lost the most ground during the spring school closures, school leaders recognize the need to prioritize in-person support for these students to prevent further learning loss.[25] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also issued guidance that reiterated the benefits to prioritizing in-person instruction for students with disabilities and English language learners because of the difficulty in meeting their needs through a virtual setting.[26] The EdResearch for Recovery brief, Academic Supports for Students with Disabilities, notes that "small group or one-to-one intervention three to five times a week is a proven way to meet individualized needs" (2020, 3).[27] Additionally, by prioritizing in-person services for students with special needs, schools are more likely to comply with IEPs and avoid litigation from parents. There have been several lawsuits brought forward from parents who say their schools failed to provide the required services under their student's IEP. According to one survey conducted in May, nearly 40 percent of families of students with disabilities said they had not received any of their IEP services during school closures.[28] Parents of students with disabilities were also twice as likely as their non-IEP peers to be doing no or little remote learning.[29]

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[21] O'Neill, P. "Navigating Compensatory Services and Reentry Supports." Charter School Equity Project Convening, June 12, 2020.

[22] Gross, Opalka, & Gundapaneni, 2020.

[23] Charter School Equity Project Convening, June 12, 2020.

[24] Mitchell, C., (Aug. 7, 2020) "Students in Special Education, English Learners May Go Back to Class First. Here's Why." *Education Week.*

[25] Jones, N.; Vaughn, S.; and Fuchs, L. (2020). "Academic Supports for Students with Disabilities." EdResearch for Recovery, Brief #2. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

[26] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Operating schools during COVID-19: CDC's Considerations. Updated Oct. 29, 2020.

[27] Ibid, 3.

[28] Parents Together Action, ParentsTogether Survey Reveals Remote Learning is Failing Our Most Vulnerable Students

[29] Ibid.

A survey conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) sought to get the district perspective on how special education service provision went in the spring.[30] In a nationally representative survey of 744 districts, AIR found that "nearly three-quarters (73%) of districts reported that it was more or substantially more difficult to provide appropriate instructional accommodations, while over three-quarters (82%) said that providing hands-on instructional accommodations and services was more or substantially more difficult" (AIR, 2020, 4). Providing hands-on services such as physical therapy is clearly challenging in a virtual setting, but 60 percent of districts also reported that speech therapy was more or substantially more difficult to provide remotely.[31]

In the same survey, AIR assessed how districts provided support and resources for English learners during the spring. The survey found that a large share (75-81%) of urban districts provided English learner-specific remote learning materials, instructional materials in Spanish, and interpreters or family liaisons to communicate with families.[32] Rural school districts were less likely to provide those specialized resources and supports to English learners with 60 to 63 percent of rural district doing so. School districts with a large share of English learners were also more likely to provide those supports than districts with a low share of English learners. Given the importance of ensuring equitable access to education, it will be important to ensure that rural districts and districts with a lower share of English language learners have the resources to build their internal capacity to better serve students with language development needs.

Policy Considerations for Local Education Agencies

Both traditional school districts and charter schools face a murky policy landscape on top of the other challenges posed by COVID-19. State policies around assessments, accountability, and educator evaluation have been affected by the cancellation of assessments in the spring. Charter school authorizers also must grapple with how to renew charter school contracts without summative data and during a time of massive disruption for schools.

Charter Renewals

The Charter School Institute (CSI), as an example, was in the renewal process for several charter schools when the pandemic hit. CSI decided to move forward with the renewal process with some modifications. CSI recognized that renewal decisions will only get more difficult as schools go another year without state performance frameworks.[33] Staff at CSI described their renewal process as relying heavily on trend data. Going forward, therefore, will be more difficult as the pandemic is going to cause a significant disruption in the middle of a trend for many schools, whereas their current group of

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[30] Jackson, D. and Bowdon, J., (2020). Research Brief: Spotlight on Students with Disabilities. American Institutes for Research.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Garcia-Arena, P. and D'Souza, S. (2020). Research Brief: Spotlight on English Learners. American Institutes for Research.

[33] A stakeholder group has recommended to the Colorado Legislature that state accountability for schools be paused for the 2020-21 school year. http://www.cde.state.co.us/safeschools/covid-stakeholder-group

renewals is looking at a question mark at the end of their trend. The charter schools going through the renewal process in 2020 have four out of the typical five years of academic summative data to rely on. If that was not enough to demonstrate a clear trend, CSI permitted schools to submit an additional body of evidence to demonstrate a sustained positive trend. CSI also communicated with schools earlier in the process than usual regarding their baseline recommendation to allow schools to have the time to submit additional evidence if they wanted to try to increase the length of their contract term. That strategy also alleviated some anxiety for schools going through renewal. Depending on how state policy issues around assessment and accountability get resolved, CSI knows they will have to continue to approach their charter renewal process with flexibility. At the same time, CSI holds firm to their core values that drive their renewal decision-making:

- Maintain transparency throughout the process
- Continued commitment to evidence-based decision-making
- Ensure consistent expectations for schools
- Provide choice and agency for schools.[34]

Assessments

The decision to administer state tests or not will be affected by the health environment that Colorado finds itself in next spring. Assuming there is a safe way to test students at the end of the 2020-21 school year, some groups are advocating for the state to administer assessments so that data can be gathered on the impact of COVID-19. Statewide assessments provide a comparable measure for all students and allow for the disaggregation of data. With such data, policy makers, school leaders, parents, researchers, advocates, and others can understand how the pandemic affected the learning of different groups of students. If low-income students or students with disabilities, for example, are seeing their education gaps widen further during the time of COVID-19, the state and local education agencies can allocate resources to those groups. For those reasons, there is a push to administer assessments as a way to promote equity in education. Ideally, there would also be contextual data collected to understand whether students were learning remotely, in-person or through a hybrid schedule. Other factors such as student engagement and attendance, family engagement and social-emotional needs could bring an important layer to understanding how the pandemic affected student learning, especially among vulnerable populations.[35]

Additionally, while accountability will likely be suspended for the 2020-21 school year, administering assessments in Spring 2020 could allow for academic growth calculations to be made in 2022, which would be a key component of resuming the state's accountability and educator evaluation systems. Colorado gives the most weight in a school rating to academic growth because it is seen as a more equitable measure than academic achievement, which is highly correlated with students' background.

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[34] Charter School Institute, 2020 Renewal Modifications due to COVID-19.
[35] Student Assessment During COVID-19, Center for American Progress, 2020.

Strategies for Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19

Amidst these legal and policy uncertainties, school leaders have had to move forward into the new academic year. The abrupt shift to online learning in the spring meant schools had no time to plan for virtual learning. Schools had to distribute technological devices, set up internet hot spots and support families with accessing food, trauma support, and social safety nets. The start of the 2020-21 school year gave more of a runway to prepare, although that benefit should not be overstated. For many school districts, plans changed over the summer and they did not announce final reopening decisions until August. The lack of state guidance and shifting local politics made it difficult for school district leaders to come to a final decision.[36] School leaders have had to quickly learn what worked and what did not work from the spring and translate that into an improved learning environment this fall.

Schools have spent the fall semester trying to both catch students back up and deliver new grade level content to ensure students do not fall further behind. Whether a school is offering classes in person, remote or a hybrid of the two, there is an unprecedented level of burden on schools. If schools are holding in-person classes there are challenges with maintaining a clean environment, staggering drop off and pick up times, maintaining separate student cohorts and even dividing up playground space. For schools offering remote instruction, they must almost entirely recreate their learning model, which requires increasing student and teacher comfort with technological platforms and new class routines. They have to monitor student engagement and think creatively about class scheduling. Many school districts are navigating both sets of challenges by offering in-person instruction for younger students and students with special needs while offering remote learning for older students.

This section and the following case studies highlight strategies that schools are pursuing to combat these daunting challenges. Given that there is not summative data to measure student progress, it is difficult to predict which strategies are going to be most effective for educating students. Nonetheless, there are a variety of approaches that school leaders say are helping them connect with students and families, increase student engagement, and ensure equity and access to a quality instructional experience during the time of COVID-19.

Strategies for Promoting Equity and Access in the Time of COVID-19
- Build strong relationships with students and families and have clear, frequent lines of communication with them.
- Prioritize providing in-person instruction to students with disabilities, English language learners and other vulnerable populations.
- Set clear expectations for how schools will address learning loss and meet unique student needs.[37]

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[36] CRPE. (2020). Lessons Learned from Six School Systems, Policy Brief: Aurora Public Schools.
[37] Lake, R. and McKittrick, L. (Oct. 15, 2020). "Special Education must no longer be an afterthought." The Lens. CRPE.

- Rather than relying on a sum of the hours of deferred services, conduct individual assessments for students with IEPs to document present levels of student mastery and retention and assess their needs.[38]
- Create individualized remote learning plans for students on IEPs based on their individual assessments that set specific goals for remediating learning loss and social regression. Such plans should also specify how services will be provided in a continuous and consistent manner, regardless of further school disruptions.[39]
- Ensure that older students with disabilities are receiving the support and life skills they need to be able to transition from high school into postsecondary education and careers.[40]
- Be strategic with staffing and pair teachers who are the most effective in a remote setting with students who are furthest behind.[41]
- Capitalize on the opportunity remote learning provides to scale up competency based learning and individualized instruction.

There is optimism in the field that despite the overwhelming odds stacked against them, schools are making headway in catching kids up and delivering a solid educational experience this year. The founder and CEO of STRIVE Prep, Chris Gibbons, says that while remote instruction is not as good as in-person learning, his network of schools have nevertheless found a way to deliver a quality learning experience this fall and he is proud of that. The leader of Stone Creek Charter School, Michele Miller, believes that while most students started academically behind this school year, by November, at least 70 percent were back on track. The school is working to target additional support to the other 30 percent of students. Head of School, Sonya Hemmen, at Ross Montessori Charter School said her students with special needs did not experience COVID-19 learning loss due to the school's push to maintain interventions and one-on-one support during the pandemic. The next section provides more detail about these Colorado case studies and includes references to recently published case studies featuring charter schools in other states.

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[38] O'Neill, 2020.
[39] Lake and McKittrick, 2020; O'Neill, 2020.
[40] Lake and McKittrick, 2020.
[41] Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020.

Colorado Charter School Equity Project: Summary of National Case Studies

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has been a key source of data on the state of schools as COVID-19 hit the country.[42] In October 2020, CRPE released a series of case studies that provide a qualitative, deep look at how some districts and charter management organizations handled school closures in the spring, and how they have prepared for the fall semester.[43] The case studies feature four traditional public school districts, including Aurora Public Schools. The report also includes the following two charter school case studies:

- Green Dot Public Schools, Urban charter network serving grades 6-12 in Los Angeles, CA
- LEARN Charter Schools, Urban charter network serving grades PreK-8 in the Chicago area

Research from Bellwether Education Partners (2020) also employed a case study analysis to uncover promising practices that schools, both charter and traditional, are employing to improve learning in a remote or hybrid setting. The authors note that at this point in the school year, it is too early to tell what strategies will be most impactful. The school leaders they interviewed, however, have all taken what they learned in the spring and translated that into stronger learning environments this fall. The report, *Promise in the Time of Quarantine*, includes the following charter school case studies:

- **Breakthrough Public Schools**, Urban charter network serving grades K-8 in Cleveland, OH
- **Impact Public Schools**, Charter network serving grades K-3 in a suburb of Seattle, WA
- **Kairos Academies**, Urban charter school serving grades 6-7 in St. Louis, MO
- **KIPP Columbus High School**, Charter school in the KIPP Public Charter Schools Network serving grades 9-12 in Columbus, OH
- **Rocketship Public Schools**, Urban charter network serving grades preK-5 in Milwaukee, WI, Nashville, TN, Washington, D.C., and the Bay Area, CA
- **Steel City Academy**, Charter school serving grades K-2, 7-12 in Gary, IN
- **Summit Sierra High School**, Charter school in the Summit Public Schools Network serving grades 9-12 in Seattle, WA
- **Treasure Valley Classical Academy**, Rural charter school in the Hillsdale College Barney Charter School Initiative Network serving grades K-7 in Fruitland, ID
- **Uncommon Schools**, Urban charter network serving grades K-12 in cities in MA, NJ, and NY

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[42] https://www.crpe.org/thelens

[43] CRPE, Lessons from Remote Learning in Six School Systems, 2020.

Colorado Charter School Equity Project: Colorado Case Studies

Stone Creek Charter School

Stone Creek Charter School serves grades K-8 in three campuses across Eagle County (one in Gypsum and two in Edwards). The school is intentionally focused on meeting the individual needs of students and families and ensuring that all students, including SPED, ELL and low-income students, feel welcome and included.

Demographics

2019-20 Data

- 321 Students
- FRL Eligible: 14%
- English Learners: 21%
- Minority Students: 31%
- Students on IEPs: 19%

Challenges

COVID-19 has disrupted education in such a dramatic way that parents and educators are both grappling to process the change. Michele Miller, Head of School for Stone Creek Charter School, said she has witnessed her community go through a cycle of grief and loss.[44] Both parents and teachers want the school to go back to the way it was before COVID-19, but it will not be that way anytime soon. Miller says aligning expectations with reality is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. Her approach is to try to shift some of the mindsets of her staff and families and realign expectations. There is a need to acknowledge that schools are still in uncharted territory and are continually learning and adjusting. She recommends celebrating the small victories and encouraging families and teachers to be patient and show grace to each other.

In addition, Stone Creek Charter School, like other rural schools, struggles with recruiting and retaining staff in normal times. COVID-19 has only exacerbated those challenges. The school was able to fill classroom teacher positions this fall, but had difficulty finding paraprofessionals and specialists in the areas of English language learners and special education.

Ensuring Access and Equity

It is challenging to assess student needs when they are not attending in person, but Stone Creek Charter School is making intentional efforts to ensure each child is being equitably served. Special education (SPED) students comprise about 12 percent of the school's population. The Head of School says they have relied on their authorizer, the Charter School Institute, who has been an enormous asset in navigating the SPED landscape during COVID-19. The authorizer provides a special education director who works with the school to ensure IEPs are being amended as needed and that students are getting appropriate services. Most students have been attending in person this fall, but for those who have chosen distance learning they come into the school periodically for services, often meeting on the school playground. School staff are flexible and work with families to set up a time that works for them.

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[44] Interview with Michele Miller, Oct. 30, 2020.

The school ensures all staff who work with SPED students are aligned in their understanding of what each student needs, and they work to communicate regularly with all caregivers in the student's family.

It is particularly difficult to provide language acquisition support when students are not attending in person. The school has found that their students in remote learning are more absent and less engaged. The school does not have transportation or meal services, so it can be hard to find touch points with families. Miller noted that for English Language Learner students who are attending in person, the school is able to identify and meet their needs, and they continue to work on strategies to fully support families who are remotely learning.

As Head of School, Miller also places much emphasis on supporting the social emotional needs of her students. While academic growth remains critical, Miller knows that students cannot make academic progress until they are ready to learn. She is working with her staff to ensure students are supported in dealing with the myriad of stressors affecting them in and out of the school building. Stone Creek Charter School does not have an in-house school counselor. Miller has been taking on some of that role as a school leader, even being willing to hold space with middle school students and giving them the opportunity to talk through their personal challenges. She held trainings over the summer for her staff on programs that support the social-emotional needs of kids. The school does contract with a school-based therapist from the Aspen Hope Center, who provides a significant amount of help. But the therapist is spread across the school's three campuses and it is difficult to meet the growing needs of students. The Head of School says she will continue to work with her staff to support students in being ready to learn. While it is difficult to find certified counselors to work in rural schools, Miller will continue to search for one.

Key Strategies & Takeaways

- The school used their remote learning platforms even during in person instructional time this fall, which has helped both teachers and students **build their familiarity with the technology**. When the school's middle grades had to shift back to remote learning in November, this allowed for an easier transition.
- **Strategically leverage relationships** with families to keep track of students and assess needs. For example, if a certain staff member has a good relationship with a family, have that staff member be the point of contact.
- If the school must shift to fully remote learning, prioritize using the building to **provide in-person services to students with special needs**, children of essential workers, and other families in need. This strategy is subject to staff capacity and safety guidelines.
- **Set realistic expectations** for both teachers and families. Communicate clearly and frequently with parents to help them understand how school will look different, especially as changes are expected to keep occurring this winter.
- Dedicate time and resources to meeting the **social-emotional needs** of students so that they can be ready to learn.

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STRIVE Prep

STRIVE Prep serves 3,800 students in grades K-12 in 10 schools throughout Denver. The school is committed to the belief that all students should have access to a high-quality education.

Challenges

STRIVE Prep CEO and Founder, Chris Gibbons, sums up the challenges facing all schools: "We are reinventing the learning model without the resources, time or expertise to do so."[45] He notes that we had solved none of the big systemic challenges prior to the pandemic and now we have added a whole list of new challenges. Leaders such as Gibbons are facing the reality that it will be several years before school funding bounces back and before a typical accountability cycle resumes.

The lack of an aligned strategy between federal, state and local governments around school reopening has created extra challenges for school leaders who are left on their own. Colorado state officials have left school reopening decisions to local education agencies, which has placed an enormous burden on school district leaders and charter school leaders who have had to become health experts overnight. School leaders now spend most of their time tracking case rates, developing and shifting protocols for in-person and hybrid learning, and communicating with schools and families about COVID-19. Gibbons said his time is almost entirely spent on managing health protocols while other members of his leadership team are taking on the responsibility of supporting schools with day-to-day implementation of their learning model.

Ensuring Access and Equity

STRIVE Prep serves primarily low-income communities of color. These communities are facing immense challenges from all angles including higher COVID-19 rates, racism, poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity. When the pandemic struck, STRIVE Prep created a Crisis Relief Fund Grant that raised over $100,000 to support their families. Other charters across the country undertook this effort as well, which was a way for schools to be responsive to the varied needs of their families. The first few months of the pandemic had schools operating in triage mode, trying to ensure that families had access to wraparound supports to meet their basic needs as well as access to technological devices and internet so that students could learn remotely.

While STRIVE Prep was focused on creating a baseline level of infrastructure to support remote learning in the spring, they have shifted focus this fall to improving remote learning by implementing common instructional routines, measuring student progress and building relationships with students. STRIVE Prep

Demographics
2019-20 Data

- 3,500 Students across 10 schools
- FRL Eligible: 90%
- English Learners: 59%
- Minority Students: 97%
- Students on IEPs: 15%

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[45] Interview with Chris Gibbons, October 27, 2020.

leadership is also focused on reversing the "no accountability" mindset that took over the education sector in the wake of the shutdown. While certain accountability measures, such as school ratings, are on hold, Gibbons is trying to get his staff to focus on what they still have control over and can still hold themselves accountable for. Attendance is still being taken daily and students are receiving course grades. While some of the policies around those tasks have had to change, the overall principle behind them - that students need to be showing up for class and trying their best to learn - remains. Advisors check in frequently with students to make sure students are staying on track and to provide targeted support as needed.

STRIVE Prep is ensuring equitable access to learning for their students with disabilities in multiple ways. They have prioritized opening their center programs for in-person learning and services. The school network has attempted to keep things as familiar as possible for their students with disabilities who are learning remotely by keeping case managers with the same caseloads and keeping students with their same small peer groups using Zoom breakout rooms.

Key Strategies & Takeaways

- STRIVE Prep's philosophy is that the effectiveness of a school is dependent on **good communication between parents and teachers**. This is true in normal times and is even more important in times of crisis. Thoughtful communication to families and students sets the foundation for ensuring access to a quality education.
- **Operational effectiveness** is another foundational strategy for navigating challenging times such as these. STRIVE Prep was able to quickly and nimbly divert resources that they knew would be saved (for example, funding from transportation services not being used) toward Chromebooks for their students. To a large extent, access and equity are driven by a school's commitment to putting staff and resources toward meeting prioritized student needs.
- Preserving some **level of continuity** helps families and teachers adjust to remote instruction. STRIVE Prep has tried to adapt and transfer what were their in-person instructional foundations to an online setting. Keeping the same core instructional practices has helped them transition to the new space of remote learning. Similarly, SPED case managers have tried to keep their supports as familiar as possible for students with disabilities.
- It is possible, and necessary, to **retain a focus on accountability** within reason and with an understanding that the education sector has never faced a challenge such as this. Moving forward, **parent trust and loyalty and school finances** should be valued as key metrics within an accountability framework. A school's performance rating, for example, should reflect the extent to which a school was able to weather the pandemic with a stable budget, consistent enrollment, and high parent satisfaction.
- The lessons schools are learning from using various technological platforms and resources will be something that benefits schools in the long term, even when classes resume back in person. **Leveraging technology to support instructional effectiveness** is something that schools have needed to improve on before COVID-19, and they could come out of this pandemic better able to do that.

Ross Montessori Charter School

Ross Montessori Charter School is a public school authorized by the Charter School Institute that serves grades K-8 in Carbondale, CO. The school implements a Montessori model and embraces the following core values: children, joy of discovery, dedication to mastery, compassionate love and community.

Challenges

Montessori education is individualized and hands-on: two attributes that added unique difficulties for Montessori schools during the pandemic, according to leadership at Ross Montessori Charter School.[46] The school relied on its global network of Montessori schools in developing an online program that still adhered to their school model's principles. Because Montessori schools do not use much technology during the school day, when COVID-19 hit, it was a big lift to get school staff trained on and comfortable with technological tools and platforms. Students were more adept with technology, but many families needed devices. Not having hands-on materials was difficult for both students and teachers, with the youngest children struggling the most.

In part because the school model is so heavily dependent on hands-on, in-person learning, the school leadership team and staff worked tirelessly over the summer to make a return to in-person learning possible for students in fall 2020. The school has held full-time, in-person classes for all grade levels. About 85 percent of their families have chosen to attend in person, while 15 percent have opted to learn remotely. One of the puzzle pieces in returning to in-person learning is how to adjust the way students and teachers interact. In a normal year, students at Ross Montessori attend a different enrichment class every day. In the 2020-21 school year, to keep teacher exposure low and reduce cross-cohort exposure, the school offered one enrichment per week. Students attend performing arts one week, and then visual arts the next week, for example. Instead of seeing a different enrichment teacher every day, they see one teacher for a week and then do not see that teacher for another 4-5 weeks. This adjustment has worked well to keep cohorts safe and has also been popular among students who enjoy building deeper skills for a week. Tackling this challenge has allowed the school to persist in its mission of having an enriching school environment in which students are immersed in the joy of discovery.

Ensuring Access and Equity

In early April 2020, the school's leaders and staff were focused on getting students and families devices and lunches and ensuring other basic needs were met. After that, the school was able to quickly ramp up providing needed educational support and services virtually for students to stay on track. Students who needed the most support had one-on-one virtual meetings with a lead teacher, assistant teacher or interventionist each day. School staff reports that families were engaged and committed to continuing

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[46] Interview with Erin Beaudette, Director of Student Services; Mandi Franz, Teaching Coach; and Sonya Hemmen, Head of School. Dec. 10, 2020.

their IEP/504 Plan services during remote learning in the spring, and the school prioritized maintaining those services. According to fall interim assessment data, children who receive interventions at Ross Montessori did not experience a COVID-19 learning loss, but rather they have maintained their progress or have seen academic growth.

In preparation for in-person learning in the fall, the school leadership team developed a strategy to adhere to cohort guidance from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and still provide needed services and interventions for all students. Instead of having students see separate adults for various interventions, one staff member is assigned a classroom and provides all interventions (IEP/504 Plan services, English language development, literacy support, gifted and talented services, etc.) for that group of students. The Director of Student Services says she worked to play to the strengths of her interventionists to ensure they were matched in the grade level and content area they were most comfortable with. Where appropriate, the school also includes students in devising their learning plans and setting goals to increase student buy-in and improve efficiency. The strategy has so far proven beneficial in helping students be more engaged and build stronger relationships with adults. Students used to see four to five different adults for behavioral and academic supports, and now they see one adult plus their classroom teacher. Ross Montessori's leadership team is intentional about working smarter and more creatively to ensure that their core value of "children" is always at the forefront of how they operate. In this way, they are ensuring equity and access while navigating all the hurdles COVID-19 is throwing at them.

Key Strategies & Takeaways

- Head of School Hemmen emphasizes the important role that **mindset, relationships and culture** play in navigating a crisis. If you have strong foundations of trust among staff members and between family and school staff, then schools can experiment and try different strategies to grapple with the crisis. Ross Montessori's culture of trust was an essential asset prior to the pandemic, and it has allowed the school to handle the crisis with grace, agility, and creativity.
- Their strong culture plays out in their adherence to the school's core values. Rather than letting panic drive decision making, the **school turns to their core values to ground them**. The first core value is simply "children." The school leadership team pointed to this value as what drives their decisions. If something is not right for kids or does not align with the other core values, it does not get done. Conversely, if something is right for kids, but may be difficult or uncomfortable for staff, the school leadership team focuses on their core values to help staff make the right, but hard, decision. During COVID-19, Head of School Hemmen says her staff has been flexible and open to shifting daily to ensure that they do what is best for their children.
- **Bring the classroom home** as much as possible. The school has put together bags of Montessori materials for students to take home and support remote learning when needed. The bags include art supplies, alphabet manipulatives, memory games, links to music, and more. The bags are grade appropriate and support both core content learning and enrichment activities.
- Lastly, the Head of School says one strategy they are using to get through this pandemic is to "**celebrate every day**." In a time when everyone is struggling and burnout is high, a school leader who embodies a positive, can-do mindset can be a game changer.

APPENDIX A: Resource Library

In June 2020, over 70 charter school leaders and authorizers gathered for a virtual summit focused on ensuring access and equity for all students during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. Resources collected for that convening are provided below.

Federal & State Guidance

- [Preventing and Addressing Discrimination, COVID](#)

- [Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Schools While Protecting the Civil Rights of Students](#)

- [Providing Services to Children with Disabilities](#)

- [IDEA Part C and C to B Activities During COVID-19](#)

- [Special Education & COVID-19 FAQs](#)

- [Individualizing Responses for Students' Needs](#)

- [Nimble, Flexible Instructional Guidance](#)

- [Disaster Guidance: Flexibility and Waivers](#)

- [CDC Interim Guidance on Reopening Schools and Summer Programs](#)

- [Guidance to address impacts on instruction for ELLs](#)

Tools & Resources

- [CDE's Toolkit for the 2020-21 School Year](#)

- [EdResearch for Recovery](#): Series of briefs to guide schools' COVID-10 recovery decisions using data and evidence

- [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#)

- [Aurora Institute Continuity of Learning Resources](#)

- [CDE List of Learning Supports for Students with Disabilities](#)

- [CDE Resources for Families of Students with Disabilities During COVID-19](#)

- [Behavioral Health Universal Screening Toolkit](#)

- [MTSS, RtI, PBIS Crosswalk](#)

- [The Hexagon: An Exploration Tool](#)

- [CDE School Counselor Sample of Needs Assessment](#)

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- [Jeffco Restart Model](#)

- [27J Learning Plan](#)

- [Boulder Reentry Model](#)

- [MAP (Measures of Academic Progress)](#)

- [Learner Variability Navigator](#)

- [Special Education and the Coronavirus: Legal FAQs about IEPs](#)

Promising Practices

- [How to Reopen Schools: A 10-Point Plan Putting Equity at the Center](#)

- [Reentry for SPED Students](#)

- [Promoting Well-Being & Connection](#)

- [Universal Screening & Tiered Supports](#)

- [Equity & Access in Blended/Online Edu](#)

- [7 Ways to Make Distance Learning More Equitable](#)

- [Virtual K-12 Public School Programs and Students with Disabilities: Issues and Recommendations](#)

- [Access and Equity for All Learners in Blended and Online Education](#)

- [Professional Development for Virtual Schooling and Online Learning](#)

- [Addressing Learning Losses](#)

- [Educating All Learners During COVID-19](#)