

Promise in the Time of Quarantine

Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19



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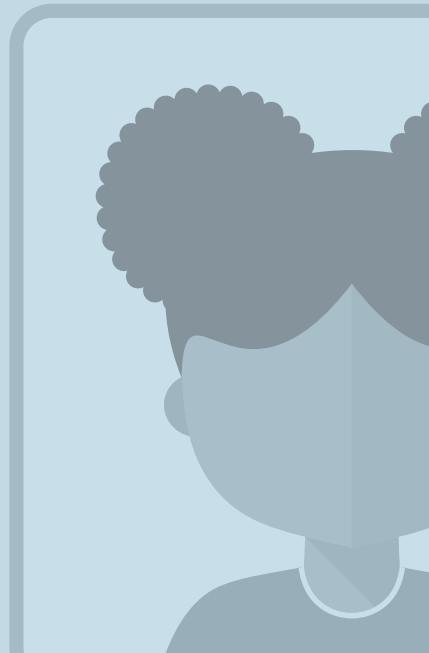
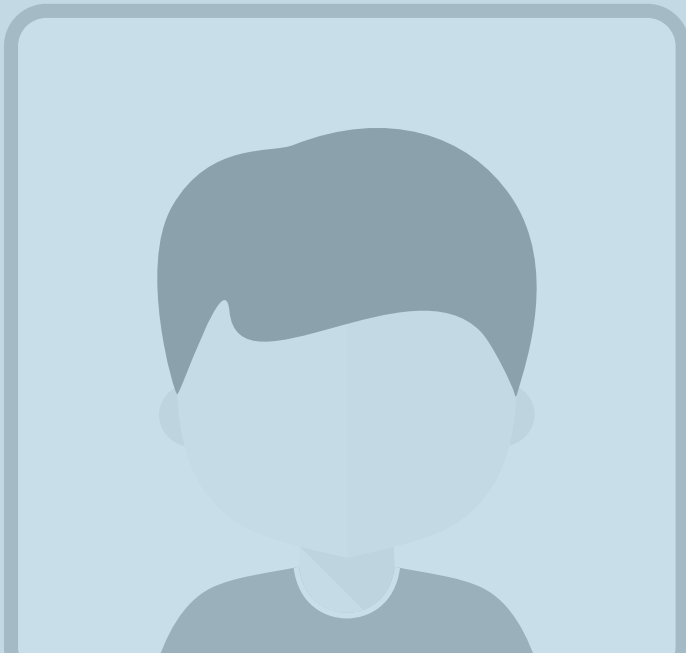
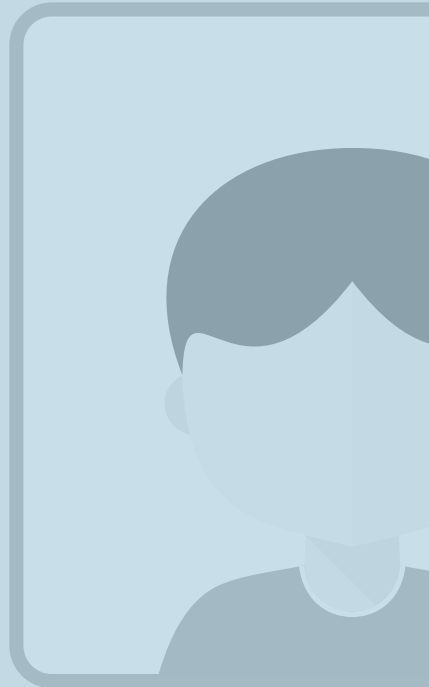


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Introduction

Covid-19 altered education as we knew it. The pandemic and ensuing closures required schools to fundamentally rework their approaches to educating students.

The difficulty of this task cannot be understated. For the vast majority of schools, all institutional knowledge oriented around the physical classroom. Class schedules, instructional practices, routines and norms, curricula – nearly everything schools knew how to do before March 2020 was upended. Schools had to design and implement a plan for distance learning with next to no foundation. While some schools had technology in place, and some relied on certain programs or platforms to enhance in-person instruction, few ever considered the possibility of fully virtual learning. COVID-19 closures forced most schools to shift to distance learning within days, complicated by both too much general information and not enough state and federal guidance.

At the same time, schools recognized their ever-increasing role as primary custodians of students' and families' well-being. These dual priorities – sustaining student learning and ensuring students were safe, fed, and well, all outside of the school building – stretched and challenged schools.

Over the course of the spring, an apocryphal narrative popped up around how schools handled distance learning. Apparently, they failed, and also flunked, and remote learning didn't work. But like many mainstream narratives about education, the alarmist headlines didn't capture the nuance of reality.

It's true that schools struggled. Student engagement was low — often lower among more vulnerable student populations — and content wasn't consistently engaging or rigorous. The magnitude of the impact on student learning is still unknown, but predictions are grim.

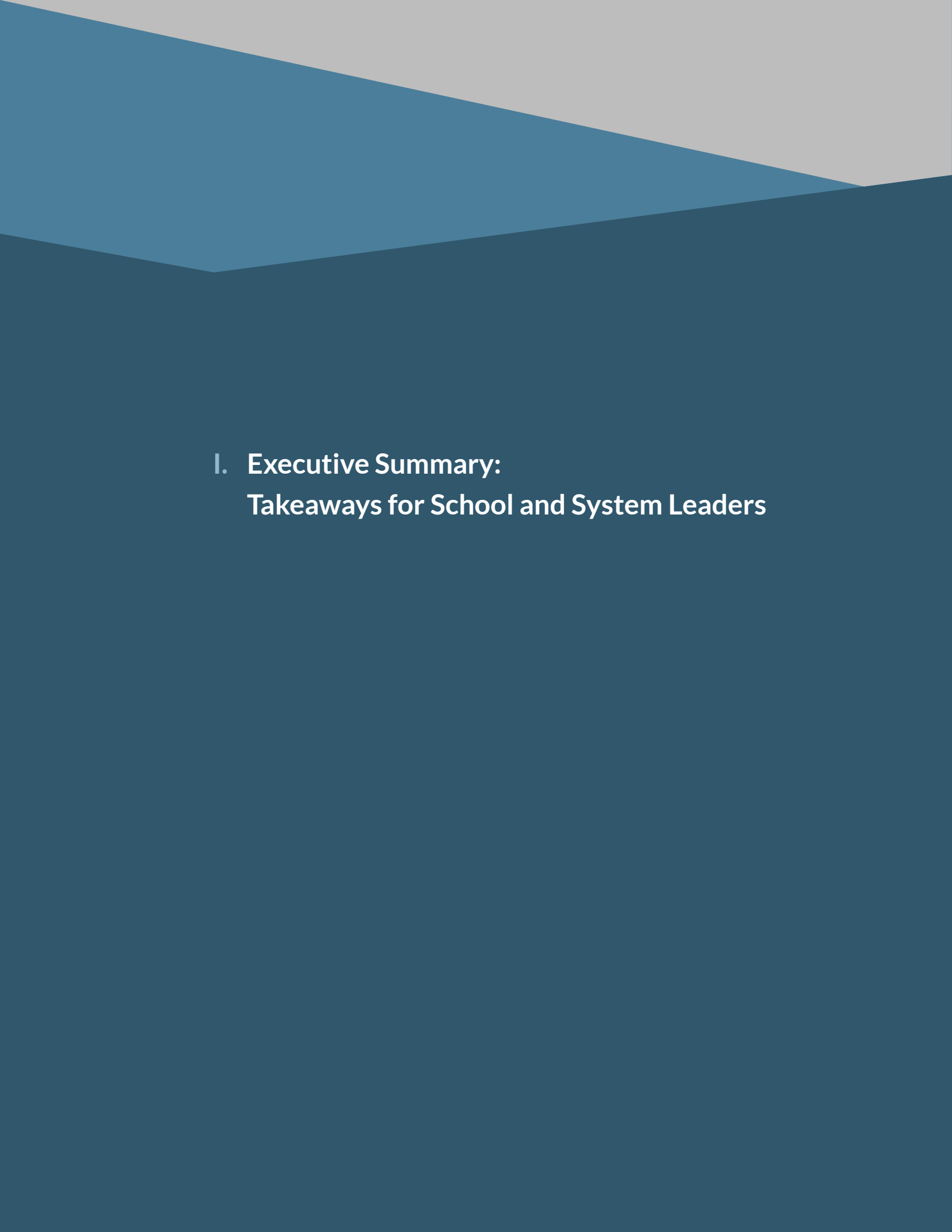
But certain schools thrived, particularly given the unexpected circumstances. Teachers adapted their instructional practices to virtual environments, special education specialists reworked Individual Education Programs (IEPs), and schools evolved their design and approaches to better fit students' and families' needs. And schools became more than a place for education: They distributed computers and tablets, brokered deals with internet providers, set up emergency relief funds, delivered meals, provided trauma counseling, and facilitated connections with social safety nets.

The effects of the pandemic extended into the 2020-21 school year. The majority of schools have no choice but to continue some form of distance learning, and they must do so while students and families still face threats to their social-emotional well-being, safety, and health. Schools also must simultaneously grapple with the added challenge of addressing the pedagogical consequences of last spring: They need to both mitigate student learning loss and promote continued — ideally, accelerated — progress.

This is a hefty mandate on an already stressed system, and it is critical that schools quickly learn from the recent past's successes and struggles. This work aims to do just that, highlighting 12 schools from across the country that showcase promising practices during distance learning. These schools represent a range of locations, school types, and contexts.

No one school has found the perfect approach to distance learning. Every school struggled. But the schools profiled here adopted promising practices in response to common challenges, offering lessons for other schools seeking to improve their distance learning models. These are not intended to be “cut and paste” practices, pulled out of one school and guaranteed effective in another. Instead, these practices are a springboard for further progress. Ultimately, this work creates a foundation for a new body of institutional knowledge, one that guides schools in effectively educating all students, regardless of setting.

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**I. Executive Summary:
Takeaways for School and System Leaders**

Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19

This brief and the following case studies explore how 12 schools or systems responded to the impact of COVID-19. The individual case studies highlight promising practices on distance learning from each school across eight categories. This brief presents key themes from across the case studies, including open questions that must be addressed in order to effectively serve students virtually moving forward. The goal of this work is to codify these lessons for the field, creating the beginnings of a growing resource for schools that are designing and evolving their approaches to distance learning. For information on how schools were selected, see Appendix A.

This work elevates promising practices that are worth exploring. “Worth exploring” is intentional language. These case studies do not name must-do practices. At this point in time, it’s impossible to tell which practices were most effective for educating students. The “right” approach to distance learning may well be embedded in these case studies, but we don’t yet have the data or distance to determine what that approach is. Instead, in the absence of knowing what schools should do, this work is designed to help schools identify what they could do, reflecting strategies that leaders identified as instrumental in addressing specific (and common) challenges in distance learning.

In the absence of knowing what schools should do, this work is designed to help schools identify what they could do.

Click on each school to jump directly to the corresponding case study.

PROMISING PRACTICE

FEATURED SCHOOLS

Providing human capital support and adjustments	Gentry Public Schools	Hamilton Grange School	Impact Public Schools	Rocketship Public Schools	Treasure Valley Classical Academy	
Innovating instructional content and approaches	Gentry Public Schools	Kairos Academies	KIPP Columbus High	Nampa School District	Summit Sierra High School	Uncommon Schools
Serving special student populations	Nampa School District	Treasure Valley Classical Academy	Hamilton Grange School			
Big-picture planning and establishing core principles	Breakthrough Public Schools	Gentry Public Schools	Nampa School District	Steel City Academy	Uncommon Schools	
Designing data-intensive approaches	Kairos Academies	Rocketship Public Schools	Steel City Academy	Summit Sierra High School		
Focusing on social-emotional learning	Impact Public Schools	Rocketship Public Schools				
Creating supportive school-student connections	Breakthrough Public Schools	Kairos Academies	KIPP Columbus High	Summit Sierra High School		
Building relationships with families and community	Breakthrough Public Schools	Hamilton Grange School	Impact Public Schools	KIPP Columbus High	Treasure Valley Classical Academy	

Identifying Common Themes in Approaches to Distance Learning

There is no one “right” way to implement distance learning.

Perhaps the most important finding from this work is that there is no one “right” way to implement distance learning. The schools profiled here were forced into distance learning in much the same way, but their approaches were very different. As the case studies show, schools’ design decisions — around instructional content, learning platforms, parent communication, teacher support and development, student schedules — all varied.

At the same time, common themes emerged from this analysis. We found that schools shared several practices (outlined below) that provide emerging insight into what distance learning looked like from a school’s perspective. Schools also shared a common challenge — serving students with disabilities — that remains a struggle in the 2020-21 school year. Taken together, these themes illuminate how schools balanced competing priorities, in the context of a global pandemic, with increasingly scarce resources — time being one of them.

As noted, in addition to these common themes, we identified specific strategies that schools employed in their approaches to distance learning. These promising practices can be found in the case studies following this brief.

In the initial weeks following school closures, schools prioritized students’ and families’ well-being.

Each of the schools highlighted in this work deeply believed that, in order to support students’ academic progress, they needed to first ensure that students and families were safe and healthy, and had what they needed to survive the destabilizing effects of the pandemic. More than one school leader noted that, in the beginning stages of distance

learning, they “focused on Maslow before Bloom.”¹ To that end, schools *temporarily* deprioritized academic rigor in an effort to support students’ and families’ well-being. This was a particularly important priority for schools serving vulnerable student populations, as many of the schools highlighted here do.

Schools weren’t able to, and shouldn’t be expected to, directly provide all the supports that families need to address food insecurity, unstable housing, or loss of employment. But schools helped where they could. Steel City Academy, for example, monitored families’ needs by tracking “human essentials” metrics for every student, including whether the student had access to two meals a day. And Rocketship Public Schools created a separate school-level team in response to COVID-19 that connected families to the right resources and helped them navigate across multiple systems as needed to access those resources.

Schools’ focus on health and safety sometimes meant that distance learning immediately following closures was not as academically rigorous as their instructional model had been previously. But where that was the case, it was the result of an intentional choice. That doesn’t mean schools disregarded academics during these few weeks; most schools sent home paper packets and resources for online activities. Schools also used this time to plan for what school would look like in a virtual environment. Impact Public Schools, for example, “locked themselves in a room” during this time to design an instructional model and systems to support student learning once the essentials were, to the extent possible, covered.

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Schools ensured students had access to technology.

Regardless of the quality of the school’s instructional model, students without access to adequate devices or the internet would never benefit from it. As such, these schools ensured students had access to the appropriate technology and did so rapidly. Breakthrough Public Schools, for example, surveyed students to determine if they had devices and internet access; the school provided devices directly to students who didn’t have them and set up WiFi access points that students could use. Breakthrough, among other schools, partnered with local internet providers to provide internet access for students at home. Several schools profiled here, such as Impact Public Schools, ordered and distributed hot spots. And Gentry Public Schools deployed buses across its district to serve as mobile internet connection points.

¹ This expression emphasizes that basic human needs must be met before academic learning can succeed. The reference is to the work of two 20th-century American psychologists: Abraham Maslow and his Hierarchy of Needs, which focused on five basic human needs, and Benjamin Bloom and his Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which prioritized higher and lower levels of cognitive learning skills. Greg Mullen, “Maslow Before Bloom,” blog post, Exploring the Core, updated April 3, 2020, <https://www.exploringthecore.com/post/maslow-before-bloom>.

School models looked similar to in-class instruction, with adaptations to fit an online learning environment.

The schools profiled in these case studies implemented distance learning models that largely reflected the model they implemented in brick-and-mortar classrooms, with strategic revisions where necessary. Schools continued to implement, for example, synchronous learning opportunities — in other words, full- and small-group direct instruction and student support. But in distance learning, there were fewer minutes of synchronous learning and instruction was delivered via Zoom or Google Classroom. Certain schools more substantially adapted the synchronous learning components of their traditional school day. Hamilton Grange School, for example, modified its regular class schedule so that all students in each grade level were in the same class at the same time. This shift allowed instructional staff to more effectively and efficiently support students.

Schools' distance learning models complemented synchronous learning with asynchronous learning.

And these schools' distance learning models complemented synchronous learning with asynchronous learning. Schools often implemented asynchronous learning before closure, using structures such as student centers and technology-driven self-directed learning. While in-person, teachers supervised students' asynchronous work, particularly in the earlier grades, even if they weren't directly engaged in providing instruction. That wasn't the case in the virtual environment. Teachers had no direct access and very little knowledge of what students were doing during asynchronous learning.

Teachers adapted their instructional practices to fit this increased reliance on asynchronous learning. Students watched prerecorded videos and contributed to message boards. In the physical classroom, teachers could identify challenges in the moment and stop the lesson to provide support or review material. In recording videos, teachers had to predict what challenges students would face with the content and build in additional review and pauses without real-time data. Breakthrough Public Schools teachers, for example, strategically incorporated pauses in their prerecorded videos.

Schools invested in structures and systems to help students and families feel connected to the school community.

After closures, schools became even more deeply invested in connections with families and students.

Prior to distance learning, the majority of schools had some way of engaging parents, collecting feedback, and developing relationships with students. But after closures, schools became even more deeply invested in these connections. Schools used a cohort structure, for example, to support students academically and social-emotionally. At Summit Sierra, every teacher was a “mentor” for a group of 20 students. Mentors served as students' instructional coaches, but also provided a source of emotional support during uncertain times. Students started every day with a 70-minute mentor block. During this block, students connected 1:1 with their mentor to discuss their goals and completed social-emotional lessons and self-directed learning under the guidance of their mentor. Other

schools had similar structures: Kairos Academies had “pods,” Breakthrough Public Schools had “crews,” Steel City Academy had “squads,” and KIPP Columbus had virtual advisories. In some cases, the cohort structure was new, developed in response to school closures. For other schools, cohorts existed previously, but warranted additional investment given the increased need for connection and support created by COVID-19.

Schools sought to deepen relationships with families, as well, by regularly reaching out to discuss student progress, provide updates, gather feedback, or simply to check in on the family’s well-being. At a minimum, the schools profiled here set an expectation that someone would connect with every family at least once a week. Other schools provided daily contact points for students and reached out to students when they were absent. For example, Kairos Academies, which contacts students regularly through its coaching model, increased its focus on students who missed class, leveraging its operations staff to reach out to these families as soon as the student’s absence was recorded. And based on family feedback, several schools adjusted their instructional model. Impact Public Schools, KIPP Columbus High, and Nampa School District, for example, incorporated additional synchronous learning time into their virtual school days after families requested it through formal and informal feedback structures.

Schools’ promising distance learning practices were largely the result of strategic retooling of existing assets.

Schools highlighted here show that many promising practices are relatively simple, requiring rethinking how to leverage resources and staff but not necessarily major investments in new tools. Uncommon Schools, for example, created high-quality prerecorded instructional videos by using 1) the existing teacher evaluation system to identify effective teachers to develop videos and 2) the existing coaching structure to support those teachers in developing lessons that would translate well on video. A Gentry Public Schools teacher created a lesson planning tool that aligned all grade-level instructional content using a Google Sheet. And Treasure Valley Classical Academy, Nampa School District, and Hamilton Grange School shifted staff roles so that a wider range of people — bus drivers, IT staff, and front office staff — supported students and families.

All schools struggled to effectively serve students with disabilities.

Serving students with disabilities is a challenge for schools across the country. The schools profiled here are no exception.

All of these schools shared the same primary challenge: effectively serving students with disabilities. This challenge isn't unique; serving students with disabilities is a struggle for schools across the country. This challenge was exacerbated by the digital divide, with more low-income and rural families lacking the devices and connectivity they need to support their students' learning needs.

At a minimum, each of the schools highlighted in these case studies implemented IEPs virtually. Several worked with parents to review IEPs at the beginning of distance learning to identify appropriate modifications. And certain schools implemented promising practices that others might find worth exploring. At Treasure Valley Classical Academy, for example, all students with disabilities were paired with a paraprofessional who attended classes with them. The paraprofessionals observed students' engagement and used those notes to inform one-on-one coaching and support sessions with students. Nampa School District was particularly effective with students who had speech therapy goals, leveraging technology and the flexible schedule to provide more tailored support in smaller groups.

But largely, because of social distancing and quarantine rules, schools failed to provide the depth and quality of services that students with disabilities received in a brick-and-mortar setting. Students with physical therapy goals could not receive in-person support. Instead, schools supplied activities that families could do at home, but often those activities required specialized equipment. Similarly, students who usually have a one-to-one in-person aide did not have that support at home. The schools highlighted here reported common challenges with regularly engaging students with disabilities in distance learning, more so than other groups of students. Attendance was often lowest for these students, and schools have yet to find a consistently effective engagement strategy.

Without effective strategies, distance learning could exacerbate the gulf between students with disabilities and those without.

Without effective strategies, distance learning could exacerbate the gulf between students with disabilities and those without. Given this concern, several of the schools profiled here — including Uncommon Schools and Treasure Valley Classical Academy — are pursuing safe opportunities to serve students with disabilities in person in the 2020-21 school year.

Making Decisions for an Uncertain Future

As distance learning continues, schools cannot afford to be reactive.

When the pandemic forced closures in March 2020, schools reacted quickly, striving to create the best distance learning model possible under those circumstances. But as distance learning continues, schools cannot afford to be reactive.

The schools profiled here identified several “open questions” — that is, questions that didn’t need to be answered this past spring, but must be proactively addressed if distance learning is going to be effective moving forward. Specifically, schools highlighted the following questions.

In future distance learning environments, how should a school ...

... get students academically back on track?

Unfinished learning, or learning loss, is one of schools’ primary concerns. Few schools got through all of the content they wanted to during spring 2020 — and that they otherwise would have if students and teachers had been in a physical learning environment.

There are multiple reasons for this gap. Some schools paused instruction altogether for the first few weeks following closures to adjust to new circumstances. Others spent time establishing new routines for distance learning, and others focused on reviewing content rather than teaching new content while students and teachers got accustomed to using

technology. And schools found that it was difficult to continue teaching at the same pace in distance learning; it took more time to teach the same amount of content than in a brick-and-mortar classroom.

Students' struggles, with distance learning specifically and with other effects of the pandemic on their lives and circumstances, exacerbated these challenges. Not all students consistently attended distance learning or engaged with the content, and students had as much difficulty picking up new content in a virtual environment as teachers had teaching it.

Taken together, school leaders believe that students experienced substantial learning loss this past spring – a “COVID slide.” A key open question for future distance learning efforts is how to measure students' learning loss and how to accommodate the gaps in their learning.

Among the schools highlighted here, Gentry Public Schools offers a strong strategy. In fall 2020, Gentry spent the first several weeks of the new school year screening students to identify learning gaps and delivering targeted instructional content to bring students in alignment with essential standards before moving on to new content.

Additionally, schools will need to grapple with how to get students academically back on track given the persistent practical challenges with distance learning. There continue to be inadequate safety nets for food insecurity and housing instability. Some students will lose internet access as providers discontinue free- and low-cost services. And students' work schedules, responsibilities for caring for siblings, and ages affect if and how deeply students are able to engage, much as they did this past spring.

A key open question for future distance learning efforts is how to measure students' learning loss and how to accommodate the gaps in their learning.

... design a school day that fits multiple learning environments?

For the majority of schools, it's unclear what learning environment will make up the remainder of this school year. Schools will likely have to shift between in-person, fully virtual, and hybrid learning options over the course of the year. Schools that opened in-person in fall 2020, for example, may not continue to do so if the community COVID-19 transmission rate exceeds a certain threshold. New York City, where Hamilton Grange School is located, will cancel in-person classes if the city's COVID-19 positive test rate rises above 3%.

As such, school leaders need to design “school days” – the schedule, norms, routines, instruction practices, and communication vehicles – for each of these environments. Coming into fall 2020, schools had some idea, based on their experience this past spring, of what they wanted a fully virtual, distance learning schedule to look like. But starting a school year fully virtual is very different than transitioning to virtual after most of a year of in-person instruction, and leaders will need to adjust their approach to account for that

difference. And even though schools have years of in-person experience to pull from, the logistics of social distancing, deep cleaning, and personal protective equipment create another situation that school leaders must figure out for the first time.

The thorniest puzzle, though, is that school leaders must design school days that can move fluidly between in-person, hybrid, and virtual contexts. In March, most school leaders had 48 hours' notice before schools closed for in-person instruction. It is possible that this abrupt shift will happen again and again over the next year, and school leaders need to have the systems, processes, and content in place to ensure that these transitions cause the least amount of disruption for students, families, and staff.

... build community in a virtual environment?

The success of distance learning relies on students' and families' investment in and commitment to participate in school in this environment. This past spring, teachers and staff leveraged their existing relationships with families and students to encourage deeper engagement. These relationships created a "we're all in this together" mindset.

But it's unclear if that mindset will persist as the urgency of COVID-19 wanes and a new group of students and families enters school. Schools aren't able to rely on existing relationships with students and families; they will need to figure out how to build and maintain new relationships. And students who had a negative experience with distance learning this past spring may be unwilling to repeat the experience and, therefore, similarly difficult to engage. Current restrictions on in-person connections make engaging students harder for schools, but doing so is crucial if distance learning is going to be successful moving forward.

All schools profiled here are at least partially virtual this fall. Schools that are able to pursue in-person interactions won't have the same amount or type of interactions that previously allowed them to develop a connected school community. For example, Summit Sierra's annual schoolwide camping trip, traditionally scheduled for the beginning of the school year, was a nonstarter in fall 2020.

The schools highlighted in this work are exploring options to build community virtually. This past spring, for example, Rocketship teachers led virtual field trips, hosted online learning parties every week, and created a teacher TikTok. And Impact Public Schools held town halls at the end of the 2020 school year, in different languages, to receive input on planning for the fall.

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... assess student engagement and progress?

Schools are grappling with how to measure two key indicators: student attendance/engagement, and student academic progress. Schools believe that data on these indicators are essential to improving the quality of distance learning.

In the past, states, districts, and schools relied heavily on annual state assessments to measure student academic progress. And while states likely will not receive waivers for this year, the data from those assessments will not necessarily be, given the circumstances, comparable to data from previous years. Additionally, many schools opted to not assess students with other tools they previously used internally (e.g., NWEA MAP). If and when these assessments are reintroduced, schools have concerns about the validity of the data they produce. Taking assessments at home could skew the data either way. Students might have access to materials they otherwise wouldn't, for example, but they also might be taking assessments on an inadequate device (e.g., a smartphone) or in an environment that isn't conducive to concentrating. In the absence of these data, schools are limited in their ability to assess the effectiveness of their distance learning model or strategize how to improve it, tailor instruction and supports for students, or identify performance gaps between subgroups.

Schools are urgently working to identify methods for measuring student academic progress and engagement.

Schools are urgently working to identify alternatives for measuring student academic progress. Uncommon Schools, for example, selected new curricula for the 2020-21 school year that have enhanced progress monitoring features. Other schools also use curricula and online learning platforms for their progress monitoring, such as the Summit Learning Platform. And Gentry Public Schools is administering internally developed assessments that are aligned with the district's essential standards.

The other indicator that schools are struggling to measure is student attendance/engagement. The historical measure of physical presence isn't possible in a virtual environment, although many schools have directly translated this measure to distance learning. Under this measure, if a student is present on Zoom or logs on at some point throughout the day, their attendance counts.

But student presence in distance learning is far from an ideal measure. Technology challenges may prevent students from logging on — or become excuses for not logging on. And, like adults, students can multitask during distance learning classes, even if they are present, in ways they wouldn't be able to in a physical classroom.

Most important, though, a presence-based attendance measure doesn't get at what schools really care about: student engagement. Schools are trying to answer: What does it mean for a student to be truly engaged in distance learning, and how do we measure that? Of course, student engagement was also the intention behind attendance measurements in physical classrooms, but engagement is even more crucial in distance learning because of the higher potential to “attend” but not “engage” in a virtual environment and concerns about learning loss.

The schools highlighted in this work show potential ways of measuring engagement. At Summit Sierra, students were asked to set goals for each class on the learning platform. Only students who made progress on their goals were counted as present. Similarly, teachers at the Hamilton Grange School assessed student engagement by monitoring and providing feedback to students in real time through a shared Google Doc.

... ensure all students are equitably served?

As discussed, all schools highlighted here struggled to develop effective strategies for serving students with disabilities in distance learning. But it's also unclear if schools are equitably serving other historically underserved subgroups of students, like English learner students, students of color, and students from low-income families.

We know from [past research](#) that these subgroups of students often show lower academic performance than their peers. It's possible that distance learning widened those gaps — and will continue to widen them without adequate intervention. Summit Sierra, for example, found that white and Asian students consistently had lower attendance and engagement rates than Black, Latinx, and multiracial students. This fall, school leadership invested in building staff capacity in [critical consciousness](#) and continues to interrogate if and how racism is baked into its systems.

In the past, schools could identify achievement gaps between subgroups based on student performance data. But schools don't have access to those data for 2020 and entered this school year flying blind. And as state- and district-level accountability systems forego student performance data for 2020, schools must be hypervigilant that historically underserved subgroups remain a priority, even without external incentives.

Moving forward, schools must grapple with the effects their decisions related to distance learning have on all students, and understand that the strategy that is best for most students may not be best for students who need it most.

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Conclusion

When states and localities announced closures in March 2020, schools had little time to prepare for distance learning. The majority of schools were ill-equipped to transition so abruptly to a fully remote, technology-reliant approach. As a result, schools struggled to develop and implement effective distance learning models that sustained student learning.

These case studies are one piece of an ongoing, larger conversation around the multifaceted support schools provide for their students, families, and communities. While each one highlights initial best practices, they are intended to provide a springboard for implementing distance learning for continued and future closures.

Moving forward, schools' distance learning models must not only sustain, but build and grow student learning. Schools have had more time to prepare for the 2020-21 school year. The schools highlighted in this work developed promising practices in distance learning, and continue to evolve and improve their practices over time. These schools offer important lessons for the field and others seeking to effectively educate students remotely. This is crucial, because, if left unchecked, the negative effects of learning loss will be wide-ranging and long-lasting, affecting the future for students, families, and the country. And the most vulnerable student populations will suffer the deepest ramifications.

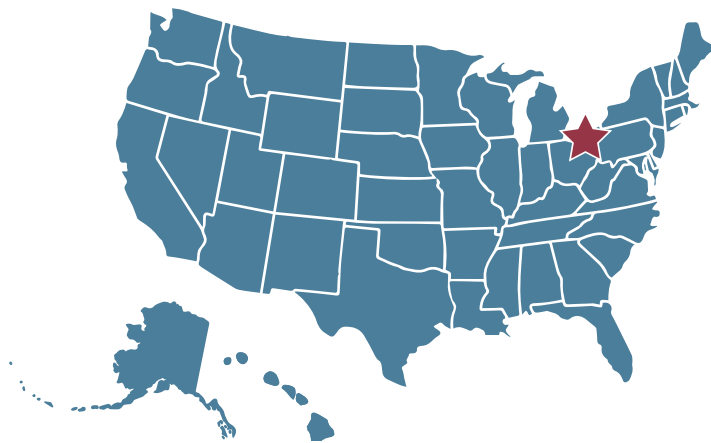
Moving forward, schools' distance learning models must not only sustain, but build and grow student learning. These case studies are one piece of an ongoing, larger conversation around the multifaceted support schools provide for their students, families, and communities.

II. School Case Studies

Promising Practices
Breakthrough Public Schools

Location: Cleveland, OH

Location Type: Urban



School Type: Charter network

Grades Served: K-8

Enrollment: 3,500

Student Demographics

American Indian / Alaska Native	< 1%
Asian	1%
Black	92%
Latinx	1%
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	< 1%
White	1%
2 or More Races	4%
Economically Disadvantaged	79%
English Learners	1%
Students with Disabilities	13%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Highlights

Big-picture planning and establishing core principles

Creating supportive school-student connections

Building relationships with families and community

Breakthrough Public Schools is a shared-services charter organization that works across multiple schools with different models of operating, in ways that are somewhat analogous to a district. Initially Breakthrough had three semiautonomous groups of schools: Citizens Academy Schools, Entrepreneurship Preps, and Citizens Leadership Academy Schools. It is currently undergoing a reorganization to more closely align these three systems. Its mission is to develop a growing network of distinctive school options in the city.

During distance learning, Breakthrough used a mixed instructional approach combining synchronous and asynchronous learning, with the percentages of each varying based on grade level. It rolled out its distance learning plan across three phases. Each phase set and met specific goals. Throughout its instructional delivery, students were provided opportunities to connect with teachers via video check-ins, classes, or office hours. Asynchronous components were used more often with the older students in an “on-demand,” flexible model to accommodate students’ personal schedules. This approach in combination with connection points using a variety of platforms such as Flipgrid, GoogleMeet, Instagram, and phone conversations helped keep student engagement at a high level.

Breakthrough Public Schools reopened on September 8 with an enhanced remote learning plan in place for all scholars. It is also consistently monitoring the COVID situation with plans for a staggered or gradual return to in-person learning as it becomes viable.

**BEST PRACTICE**

Breakthrough Public Schools used a carefully designed three-phase approach to distance learning.

Breakthrough leadership designed its closure plan to include three phases of distance education. Each phase had its own objectives and goals. Breakthrough’s goals were sequential and achievable and did not preclude the network from beginning new phases on an established timeline if some goals were not yet attained.

Phase 1 took place over three weeks, including the week of spring break and the two weeks following. The objective of this phase was to onboard staff members and families and help them adjust to this new modality.

There were four specific goals, all of which Breakthrough met:

Goal 1: Make sure at least 90% of families had access to devices and internet service by the end of the first day.

Goal 2: Ensure 100% of staff had clear roles and responsibilities, including assigning staff to groups of scholars and their families for engagement. Achieving this goal required creating professional development and infrastructure for staff.

Goal 3: Provide leaders with clear ways of tracking teacher success and scholar engagement. As an example, some schools in Breakthrough's network used the Wizer.me platform, which allows teachers to create and distribute customized assignments that are analyzed for concentration, progress, and engagement.

Goal 4: Adopt a plan to assist families in the highest-need areas, not just with technology access, but with COVID-related issues such as access to food and rent assistance, unemployment services, etc. Where needed, Breakthrough leveraged advocacy organizations and community partners.

Breakthrough spent the following four weeks in Phase 2. The objective of Phase 2 was to ensure students had access to consistent content and achieved skill mastery. "Now that we're fully engaged in distance learning," said Chief Academic Officer Andrew McRae, "we have to make the instruction good." To accomplish this, it provided intensive, instruction-based professional development for teachers across these weeks to deliver instruction that enabled students to master daily objectives. To track its success, two goals drove Phase 2, both of which Breakthrough met:

Goal 1: Provide 100% of teachers with a clear and consistent way to check for student understanding of the daily learning objectives. Teachers tracked this through daily exit tickets, student work, assignments submitted in Google Classroom, and monitored assessments.

Goal 2: Ensure that at least 90% of students complete the checks for understanding, as a measure of student engagement.

“Now that we're fully engaged in distance learning we have to make the instruction good.”

—Andrew McRae, Chief Academic Officer, Breakthrough Public Schools

In Phase 3, which extended through the end of the year, Breakthrough worked to ensure that the neediest and most vulnerable scholars — such as EL students — received equitable support with short- and long-term intervention. Breakthrough intensely audited its existing practices for serving these students, and teachers adapted practices to effectively serve special populations in a distance learning environment. For example, in some cases, teachers hosted private video meetings to work with students one-on-one on specific work products where they needed support. Intervention specialists also created their own virtual “classrooms” and met with students with IEPs at least twice a week to support them. The progress in Phase 3 was measured against two goals:

Goal 1: 100% of at-risk scholars served

Goal 2: 100% of schools modifying plans to provide services to students in a virtual environment

Across all phases, Breakthrough met all but one of the goals: In Phase 3, the school connected with 93% of at-risk students.



BEST PRACTICE

Breakthrough Public Schools sought and acted upon feedback from families to improve its distance learning model.

Breakthrough gathered feedback and input from students and families through multiple feedback cycles. The network used Google Forms, first surveying about technology and internet access, then followed up with questions about how families were adapting to distance learning, soliciting input on what support they needed. An administrator hosted weekly Wednesday Zoom meetings with families. And a weekly newsletter went out to parents with an optional survey to give feedback and make suggestions for adaptations.

In response to feedback, Breakthrough revised its processes and tools. For example, parents were initially confused by the instructional platforms and schedules. They couldn’t ascertain what information was most important, what work was required for their student, and where to find information and content they needed. Breakthrough responded by reorganizing Google Classroom for consistency across classes and with lessons clearly labeled by subject. For each class, it indicated which assignments were required and whether each element of course content was mandatory or optional.

To track direct feedback from parents, Breakthrough staff shared a communication tracker at the school level. Every teacher or staff member could review their “case load” of families, noting whom they spoke with and who needed contact. Other staff could see which parents had been reached, and who

was “missing.” They could also track content — if one teacher had already communicated an update about a student, a teacher in that grade-level cohort would know not to repeat the same message to that parent, but could provide additional information as needed. This strategy minimized the over-communication problem some schools experienced, while improving overall parent engagement.



BEST PRACTICE

Breakthrough Public Schools implemented systems that supported student-family connections.

Breakthrough’s distance learning plan featured three key components to help set students and families up for success in distance learning: access to technology, a consistent approach to instruction, and an environment that reflected “school” as they previously knew it.

First, Breakthrough supported families with their technology needs, ensuring that everyone had devices, internet accessibility, and the ability to complete their work online. This achievement is noteworthy because schools and districts across the state, including those with more resources, struggled to do so. Breakthrough went beyond simply providing access: It provided technical support. Families could access private tech support sessions on Zoom, in 15-minute blocks. Prior to moving to Phase 2, the school also checked to see if the technology was working through interactive exercises like asking students to log into Zoom for a fun assignment or completing a scavenger hunt for items in their homes through a Google Form.

Second, Breakthrough implemented a consistent approach to distance instruction across its network. Breakthrough established clear guidelines and held tight on approach and platforms, while offering flexibility on instructional modes and lesson differentiation. For example, Breakthrough required teachers to use Google Classroom and to adhere to a common structure for providing information about course requirements to students, but allowed teachers to design course content and student activities. One teacher contrasted this approach to the large city district where they are located, which implemented “innumerable” ways of distance learning. This teacher said, “Guidelines were clearer for Breakthrough. [We had] different instructional modes but were largely consistent with approach and platforms.”

“*Guidelines were clearer for Breakthrough. [We had] different instructional modes but were largely consistent with approach and platforms.*”

—Teacher, Breakthrough Public Schools

Finally, Breakthrough created a structure that made students feel like they were in a school setting. The model uses a “crew” structure, which is a small group of students led by a teacher who is their crew leader. The crew leader checked in with students, and students started every morning with their crew in “homeroom,” where they received updates and announcements while enjoying the camaraderie of peers and the teacher. This structure existed prior to the pandemic and while the nomenclature may vary from school to school, the core components are consistent across the network.

At the individual school level, administrators hosted events that felt school-like, such as noon lunches or hangouts run by the dean of students, which all staff attended. In these lunches, the dean of students often led a discussion of a social-emotional learning topic, such as how to handle yourself when managing intense emotions or how to effectively communicate about different issues. Sometimes students would play a game, like an in-home scavenger hunt; in other cases, students engaged in more organic interaction with each other and with teachers and staff via chat boxes.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

A big part of Breakthrough’s success during the COVID-19 closure was the ability to build on existing relationships among school personnel, students, and their families. They not only kept in touch, they drew closer as a community. One teacher reflected, “It could have been a terrible transition to distance learning if we didn’t have those relationships in place. We were so successful during distance learning because of the relationships that we had built prior to the pandemic happening. In a weird way, the pandemic brought me closer to parents and families.”

Breakthrough consistently looked for connection points between students and staff.

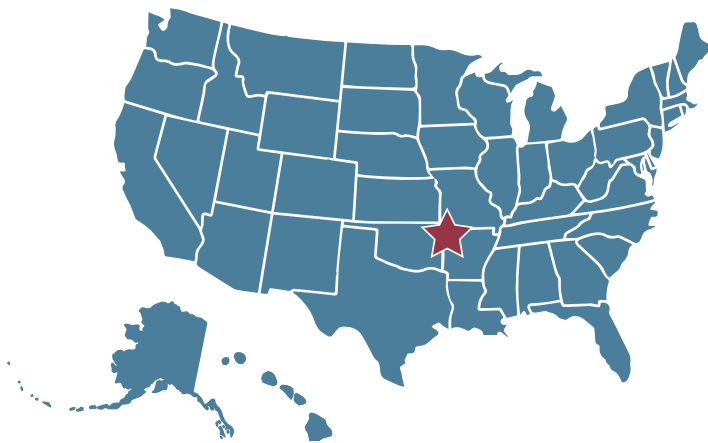
Breakthrough’s challenge for the 2020-21 school year was choosing curriculum and instructional materials. Breakthrough believed its instructional work this past spring was good in the context of a crisis, but not good enough to meet Breakthrough’s traditional high standards. Teachers found that many curricular resources simply didn’t translate to distance learning; in other cases, they had to shift some instruction to external tools normally used more for enrichment rather than instruction, such as self-directed math or reading programs. Breakthrough’s focus for this year is maintaining the long-term sustainability of instructional rigor and excellence in remote instruction, while holding the same high bar regardless of format. To facilitate this goal, it purchased a learning management system, Schoology, to provide a more consistent platform for its instructional delivery. Teachers received training on Schoology over the summer.

“We were so successful during distance learning because of the relationships that we had built prior to the pandemic happening. In a weird way, the pandemic brought me closer to parents and families.”

—Teacher, Breakthrough Public Schools

Promising Practices
Gentry Public Schools

Location: Gentry, AR
Location Type: Rural small city



School Type: Traditional district
Grades Served: Pre-K to 12
Enrollment: 1,462

Student Demographics

American Indian	4%
Asian	10%
Black	1%
Latinx	16%
White	65%
2 or More Races	4%
Economically Disadvantaged	55%
English Learners	11%
Students with Disabilities	14%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Highlights

Providing human capital support and adjustments

Innovating instructional content and approaches

Big-picture planning and establishing core principles

Gentry Public Schools is one of nearly 400 Opportunity Culture districts nationwide that utilize the Multi-Classroom Leadership Model. Through this model, Gentry extends the reach of excellent educators within a district: highly effective teachers serve as multi-classroom leaders (MCLs), leading and developing a group of instructional staff while remaining in the classroom. Gentry leveraged its MCLs to allow teachers to focus on instructional quality during distance learning. “Multi-classroom leaders are invaluable. They are a hinge point for success,” said Christie Toland, assistant superintendent at Gentry Public Schools.

In its approach to distance learning, Gentry chose Google Classroom as the platform for all grades, delivering a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. Teachers unfamiliar with Google Classroom received training and support. Distance learning instruction was aligned to a set of academic “essential standards” – the standards most necessary for students to transition to the next grade level in each subject. The district designed these standards prior to COVID-19, but revised them in the context of distance learning.

School started August 24 for both in person and virtual learners. Gentry Public Schools had two options for fall: On-site blended learning or full-time distance learning. Families enrolled in one of these two options by the semester. Remote instruction was delivered through the newly created Pioneer Virtual Learning Academy. The virtual option features a schedule that aligns closely to a traditional in-person school day. Teachers provide synchronous instruction and create video backups for students who cannot attend live. At least one teacher in each grade level is a full-time virtual instructor.



BEST PRACTICE

Gentry Public Schools created systems for teachers to develop high-quality instruction and gave them the autonomy to do so.

Teachers at Gentry Public Schools drove the instructional programming during distance learning, ensuring that students received the highest-value content for their academic trajectories. District leadership supported teachers in doing so through two processes: the district’s essential standards framework and regular professional learning communities (PLCs) supported by multi-classroom leaders (MCLs).

Essential standards are a set of academic standards, narrowed down from the state's standards, that serve as the foundation of all instruction at Gentry Public Schools. The essential standards prioritized fewer standards with higher impact, focusing on the skills that students must master in order to be successful in the next grade and the standards that thread throughout Pre-K-12. A group of teachers, building administrators, instructional facilitators, and district staff collaborated in vertically aligned, subject-specific teams to develop the essential standards. These teams developed the essential standards prior to the start of distance learning, but revamped the standards to better fit new virtual circumstances, when strategic use of instructional time became even more crucial.

The essential standards explicitly named the highest priority content for teachers, allowing them to focus their attention on developing strong instructional content. MCLs supported teachers in doing so. At one school, for example, an MCL worked with teachers to create video tutorials about online instruction for teachers and technology tutorials for parents. At another school, an MCL created a lesson planning tool that ensured instructional content was aligned. Led by the MCL, grade-level teachers worked together to define the learning that needed to happen over the course of the nine weeks of distance learning. Each week, teachers collaboratively identified the topics that were most important and recorded them on a spreadsheet. Each teacher then selected a topic to teach, created a video lesson for that topic, and shared it with other teachers to use with their students. With this document, teachers were able to strategize how best to build children's skills throughout distance learning, and clearly connected their daily lessons to the essential standards. This tool eventually spread across the district.

None of this teacher-driven intentionality would be possible without Gentry's PLCs. These were a key component of teachers' professional development prior to distance learning and continued to be a high-value structure in a distance learning environment. In PLCs, teachers worked collaboratively to identify challenges and generate solutions based on data. Teachers used PLCs, for example, to refine their distance learning practices. Every week, grade-level teachers reviewed data on student participation, successful completion of assignments, and length of time it took a teacher to create a lesson. Based on those data, the group weeded out techniques that were ineffective, developed new strategies, and repeated the review-and-improve cycle the next week.

**BEST PRACTICE****Gentry Public Schools proactively prepared to handle the uncertainty of the year ahead.**

While adapting to the challenges of distance learning this spring, Gentry simultaneously created a plan that ensured — as much as possible — that schools in the district are prepared for some form of distance learning in the future. The Gentry School District Ready for Learning Plan lays out the actions the district will take to operate both on-site blended learning and exclusively virtual school models. This two-option approach was based on feedback from a parent survey: The majority of parents wanted on-site instruction, but also wanted the opportunity to go virtual should future pandemic concerns make it necessary.

The Ready for Learning Plan provides guidance and clear action steps on multiple facets of school operations, such as communicating with parents and ensuring the continuity and quality of curriculum. The Ready for Learning Plan is also very clear on teacher training and quality. For example, all teachers are employed by the district and must be certified and demonstrate competency in technology, virtual instruction, and the instructional platform. Gentry provided training on learning platforms and blended learning instructional delivery.

Further, the distance learning strategy laid out in the Ready for Learning Plan leveraged lessons from this past spring. Schools, for example, prioritized synchronous learning, but complemented those opportunities with asynchronous learning, particularly for students who can't attend their classes because of issues with timing. And schools continued to record video lessons, in the event of a sudden school closure in the future, so that students do not have a gap in access to instructional content.

**BEST PRACTICE****Gentry Public Schools recognized the possibility for unfinished learning and has plans to address that gap.**

Gentry Public Schools' plan for addressing unfinished learning was supported by the "Back-to-School Playbook: Addressing Unfinished Learning," a state-developed guide that provides resources and strategies for opening schools in fall 2020. The playbook includes content to support schools in unit plan mapping, PLCs, and other strategies. Gentry integrated these resources into its approach to addressing unfinished learning, which reflected strategies to address both the process and content challenges that may arise.

On the process side, part of Gentry's strategy to address unfinished learning was anticipating and addressing students' reentrance needs when they rejoined instruction. The goal was to smooth the transition back into the school environment, whether they chose distance or in-person learning. Schools spent time at the beginning of the school year rebuilding familiarity with procedures and processes. The first two days of school for grades 6-12 and the first five days of school for grades K-5 were used for procedural review. The instructional content during this time included standard building and classroom management procedures, as well as new content specific to COVID-19, such as personal protective equipment etiquette, social distancing, safety requirements, and blended learning processes. There was also a heavy emphasis on social-emotional supports.

Gentry's approach additionally addressed substantive learning deficits. The first three weeks of school were used for student screening and teaching essential standards that were not covered or mastered during spring 2020. The district determined the missing content by administering internally developed assessments. These assessments closely align with essential standards so that teachers could design instructional content that fills gaps identified by the assessments. Schools will use the assessments to monitor progress throughout the year and ensure that content and learning progress continue to be aligned. Also, NWEA MAP was used as a start-of-year screener and will be administered twice more throughout the 2020-21 school year.

Gentry teachers will use disaggregated data from internal assessments and NWEA MAP to develop and tailor instructional content, with the support of their PLCs. Distance learning teachers are able to continue participating in the PLC process alongside their in-person instructional peers.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

One of the key strengths of Gentry's distance learning was the degree to which it sought out feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. The district had to quickly – within 48 hours – make decisions about how to operate a virtual school and thus could not gather input from as many voices as would be ideal at the outset. But the district was intentional about collecting feedback throughout the distance learning time. It administered surveys to teachers and families, which it used to make decisions. In response to family feedback, for example, Gentry provided more synchronous instructional time; Gentry also made staffing decisions based on what parents want their students' learning environments to be (i.e., ensuring there are enough virtual teachers to meet family demand). Parents could also contact Gentry Public Schools staff directly through weekly Zoom office hours. As a result, Gentry had a relatively clear idea of what the district is doing well and what needed to improve.

A key challenge for Gentry was its teacher evaluation system. As soon as distance learning began, teacher observations and evaluations were suspended. At that time, the majority of principals had completed the required observations – but that wasn't uniformly true, so certain teachers never received formal feedback on their practice. Because distance learning was a new environment for all teachers, observations were crucial to support teacher effectiveness. Gentry resumed teacher observations and evaluations in both virtual and in-person settings this year.

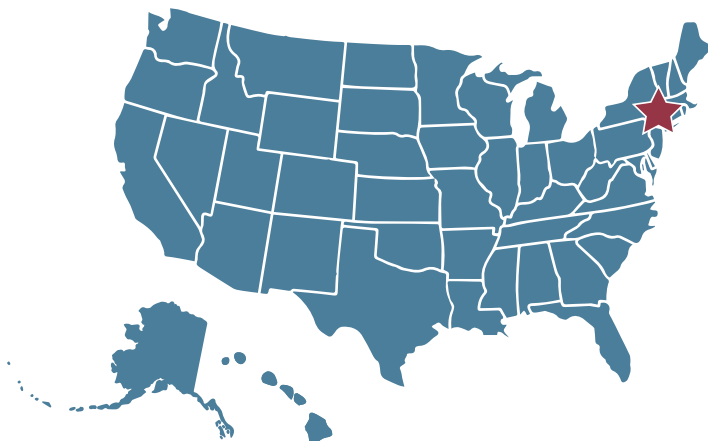
With the Gentry school year underway, the district and schools need to decide on the system's grading structure. During distance learning in spring 2020, Arkansas released a grading policy that said that no student could receive a grade lower than what they had earned before the school closed. As a result, students were guaranteed a certain grade, regardless of how engaged they were with distance learning or if they even showed up. Going forward, Gentry anticipated that its grading standards should be based on mastering specific skills. But skill mastery was not the expectation when students attended school in person, and distance learning grading last spring was even less rigorous. The district is still finalizing exactly what that structure looks like, and how to acclimate students and staff to this new structure.

Promising Practices

The Hamilton Grange School

Location: New York, NY

Location Type: Urban



School Type: District

Grades Served: 6-8

Enrollment: 350

Student Demographics

American Indian	4%
Asian	2%
Black	11%
Latinx	83%
Other	2%
White	3%
Economically Disadvantaged	95%
English Learners	33%
Students with Disabilities	23%
Students with Unstable Housing	25%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Highlights

Providing human capital supports and adjustments

Serving special student populations

Building relationships with families and community

The Hamilton Grange School, located in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, was founded in 2014 as a small-by-design school within a larger school building. Restorative justice practices and anti-racism are two of Hamilton Grange’s founding principles; its innovative approach to discipline has twice garnered recognition as a New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Showcase School and as a Teach For America School to Learn From in 2018-19.

After New York City schools closed, Hamilton Grange’s distance learning model was oriented around synchronous learning. Hamilton Grange used the live instruction time to both stay connected and to best meet the differentiated needs of students, relying on platforms such as Parlay Ideas and Google Classroom. They paired students with devices and internet access from the start of school closure. Students in unstable housing situations, who had inconsistent access to Wi-Fi, were able to connect with cellular-plan iPads provided by NYCDOE. And Hamilton Grange continued to offer enrichment classes, carving out time for “specials” at the end of each day: student clubs, health, gym, advisory, and art.

At time of publication, Hamilton Grange students are scheduled to begin classes on October 1. It planned a form of blended learning for 2020-21. Students are in one of two potential instructional models: fully remote instruction, which about half of its families selected, and blended learning. The blended learning model has students split into two groups, alternating days of in-person and remote instruction to facilitate social distancing. When students are not in school, they learn remotely via live, synchronous instruction as Hamilton Grange facilitated from March through June. Hamilton Grange worked with parents to devise small, optional learning pods of approximately ten students who convene in person on remote instruction days to complete their learning collaboratively.



BEST PRACTICE

Hamilton Grange’s approach to professional development leveraged one-on-one coaching and opportunities for teachers and coaches to collaborate and learn from each other.

Hamilton Grange supported effective teaching in a virtual environment in two ways: coaching and peer-to-peer collaboration. These two complementary structures leveraged practices already in place but adapted for the immediate needs of teachers and the virtual environment to support strong instructional delivery.

One-to-one instructional coaching is Hamilton Grange's primary vehicle for professional development and continued during distance learning. Assistant principals, counselors, and dedicated instructional coaches provided ongoing feedback and coaching for Hamilton Grange's teachers. Teachers worked daily with grade-level content coaches for planning and weekly for feedback from observations. To facilitate observation and evaluation, instructional coaches were automatically invited to every teacher's Google Classroom lessons, enabling them to "drop in" to any class. The principal and associate principals would drop in once or twice a month, as well as when requested for a new project or idea they were trying. For teachers requiring extra support, these visits sometimes took the form of daily observation, but also co-teaching, modeling lessons, and co-planning in periods designated for instructional planning.

Teachers could also request coaching sessions, allowing them to leverage support when they most needed it. If teachers did not request coaching, coaches would proactively select a time to observe a teacher's online instruction. Coaches also participated in collaborative instructional planning time. Hamilton Grange continued its strong culture of teaching into distance learning. It maintained expectations built around its Checklist for Observations, devised by the assistant principal in collaboration with the Literacy Committee, around effective practices in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

Hamilton Grange also supported teachers through peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Prior to closure as part of its normal operation, Hamilton Grange relied on teacher-led professional development committees organized around the school's "big rocks" or focus areas, including racial equity, literacy, collaborative problem solving, advisory, family engagement, and data-driven instruction. These committees continued to meet monthly post-closure to develop and share monthly training sessions.

At the beginning of distance learning, Hamilton Grange shifted the focus of these committees to more tactical and immediate needs, wrestling with how to support literacy virtually, or how to measure student achievement in the absence of assessments. As teachers gained proficiency with online instruction, the committees returned focus to their big rock areas, including addressing racial justice following the death of George Floyd.

Hamilton Grange hosted staff meetings every Monday to create space for idea exchanges, informal troubleshooting of technology and instructional issues, and discussions of student needs identified by teachers. Teachers also had a daily hour of "intellectual planning space," where they met with other grade-level teachers and coaches. During these periods, teams of teachers and, when possible, their coaches gathered by subject and grade cohorts and looked at the next day's lesson. They collaboratively determined student groupings and roles for all the adults.

As a result of these meetings, the teachers created a simple but effective tool for additional peer-to-peer support. They set up an “idea exchange” for teachers, using a shared Google Sheet. Staff shared both promising tools and tips, and identified questions or requests for help. Teachers then organically paired up based on compatible “asks” and “answers” to share promising strategies and tools and support one another in overcoming challenges as they emerged. For instance, one teacher asked her students to create short videos to demonstrate knowledge and share their thoughts using FlipGrid. Nearly a dozen other teachers signed up as interested in her “lesson” on how to do this.



BEST PRACTICE

Hamilton Grange prioritized student engagement with the instructional content and with each other.

Hamilton Grange’s leadership believes that peer-to-peer and student-to-adult relationships are essential for its middle school students’ well-being and success. Recognizing the challenge of maintaining these connections virtually, the school developed tools and processes to foster formal and informal connection points for students. For example, Hamilton Grange regularly communicated with students and families by text. In the month of May, Hamilton Grange sent over 12,000 text messages with a read rate of about 90%.

Hamilton Grange embeds a restorative justice model into its culture and operations. Broadly speaking, restorative justice models approach conflict resolution through relationship and community building and collaborative problem-solving as an alternative to more traditional and punitive disciplinary approaches. Hamilton Grange uses the Collaborative & Proactive Services (CPS) model; all staff are trained in this approach. Through it, teachers and staff leverage 1:1 conversations with students to help them develop skills necessary to succeed in classrooms (e.g., expresses concerns, needs, or thoughts in words; sticks with tasks requiring sustained attention; thinks rationally even when frustrated). The CPS model also builds relationships and empowers students to be part of the process of self-improvement. Hamilton Grange continued this model during distance learning.

This commitment to connection and engagement extended to academic instructional settings as well. Hamilton Grange set a higher standard for attendance measurement than NYCDOE required, assessing student attendance in each class versus once per day. Hamilton Grange also measured student engagement, recognizing that a teacher’s ability to engage with students online was central to learning. Teachers assessed engagement at multiple points throughout each class: “Is this student a presence in my classroom? Are they with me? Are they involved in the discussion?” Doing so required teachers to navigate between the chat, multiple Google documents, and observations of students on

video – which was a crucial component for measuring engagement, but was a heavy lift for teachers. Hamilton Grange staff followed up with families and students multiple times each day, as needed, to support their engagement in each class.

Hamilton Grange also had one person per grade level dedicated to checking attendance in every class and calling students and parents every day to follow up with absent students. As a result, the average daily attendance for at least one class was approximately 90%.

**BEST PRACTICE**

Hamilton Grange leveraged the availability of technology and flexible scheduling to differentiate instruction and supports for students.

The flexible schedule and availability of technology integral to distance learning allowed Hamilton Grange to differentiate instruction for all students, including students with disabilities and English learner (EL) students.

To that end, Hamilton Grange shifted students' schedules and class assignments during closure. The school combined grade-level classrooms: For example, the four sections of sixth grade, usually taught by two teachers each with two sections, became one class section with between two and four adults working within the virtual classroom. All students in each new classroom focused on the same subject at the same time. On a traditional school day pre-pandemic, staff had to juggle different class times for different students. This new structure allowed teachers and staff to have more time to meet as a team, review student work, give same-day feedback on documents, and plan for the next day's lesson. Students benefited from a clear structure while adjusting to the new distance learning style. It also provided clear breaks from screen time between classes.

Likewise, teachers used the flexibility of distance learning to adapt instruction. Google Classroom has features that allow teachers to embed links to recorded read-alouds they create and to provide differentiated handouts for students. Teachers and staff used online breakout rooms (Google Hangouts) to support small groups, and discussion boards provided a distance learning tool that allowed students who had been shy in the physical classroom to shine, "chatting" and participating in a way they might not have in a traditional classroom. Teachers noted that they formed deeper relationships with these specific students than they might have in person.

Hamilton Grange's support of students with disabilities was similar in the virtual classroom to how it was before schools closed. Intervention specialists, paraprofessionals, and other classified staff provided one-on-one support for students, virtually attending classes with them and sitting in on small groups. Just as occurred in person, Hamilton Grange leveraged leadership team members, including the principal, the instructional coach, and the associate principal, to support students with disabilities, sit in on classes, and help implement components of students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The ability to instantly float between virtual classes instead of navigating a physical building enabled support to quickly move to where it was needed.

IEPs were implemented virtually. Teachers leveraged technology to help students work toward their IEP goals. For example, the speech therapist shared a strategy for working with students on socialization. To keep making progress during distance learning, they used technology to help students connect via email with their teachers in a "pen pal" type style, which helped the students communicate and the teachers respond.

Hamilton Grange also worked to differentiate instruction for EL students though, as noted below, serving these students was a challenge area for the school. Classroom teachers collaborated with the EL teacher to develop content beneficial to all students that also met the requirements for EL students. The EL teacher would join the full class during the hour of instruction, supporting the students in the class who needed additional help with differentiated materials or providing pull-outs via Google Classroom.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

One of Hamilton Grange's strengths is its quick responsiveness and the staff's ability to work together to create curriculum revisions for all students. Teachers already were practiced in collaboration across teams and comfortable with professional development committees; with the closure they were given the time and space to build curriculum and distance learning processes together.

As an example, after George Floyd's death, the professional development committee structure enabled it to adapt curriculum and deliver lessons. On the Monday after the video of Floyd's death went viral, Hamilton Grange delivered two professional development sessions on culturally responsive teaching to prepare staff to develop and teach these lessons, and gave teachers the flexibility, autonomy, and support to collaborate with each other to develop this content.

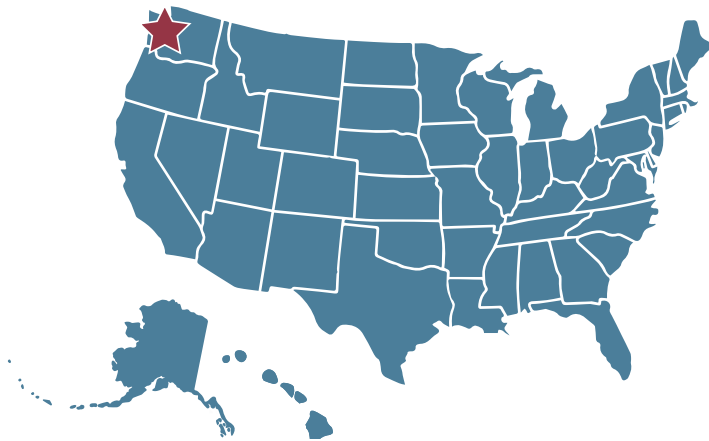
EL instruction was a challenge area for Hamilton Grange. One example was a student who didn't speak English and struggled to use a computer. The EL provider created an alternative lesson in Spanish, but the student required additional support because they didn't read in Spanish, either. While Hamilton Grange worked to provide the necessary support, the student ultimately stopped signing in to distance learning. Better meeting the specialized needs of similar students is a growth opportunity for Hamilton Grange, and it is considering where it can take lessons from remote learning this spring to better support ELs this year.

Hamilton Grange is working to address another challenge: The majority of its students prefer in-person learning. This may be because, as middle school students, their social connections are critically important to their academic and social development. Students reported in both surveys and anecdotally that they want to engage in person. The online socialization outlets like video chats, video meetings, and discussion boards fall short.

Hamilton Grange is still grappling with its open question about how to support students' mental health needs. In New York City schools, mental health counseling is provided through the district, and the current budget suggests a likely loss of about 150 counselors districtwide. While Hamilton Grange teachers, guidance counselors, and a full-time social worker make themselves available to support students where possible, capacity and training issues make it difficult to provide support as well as a trained, trauma-informed therapist would.

Promising Practices Impact Public Schools

Location: Tukwila, WA
Location Type: Suburb of Seattle



Student Demographics

Asian	7%
Black	51%
Latinx	17%
White	18%
2 or More Races	6%
Economically Disadvantaged	65%
English Learners	32%
Students with Disabilities	5%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Type: Charter network
Grades Served: K–3
Enrollment: 360



School Highlights

Focusing on social-emotional learning

Building relationships with families and community

Providing human capital support and adjustments

Impact Public Schools is a growing charter network in Washington state. Impact Puget Sound Elementary (PSE), the first school in the Impact Public Schools charter network, opened in Tukwila, Washington in 2018, serving young students in one of Washington’s most diverse communities. Impact has been authorized to open three additional schools in the state. As part of its mission, Impact seeks to advocate for policies that will close the opportunity gap and provide all students in Washington with a high-quality education. Impact students receive personalized, interactive educational experiences aligned with each student’s specific needs.

About two weeks before closure, Impact acquired and distributed enough Chromebooks and hotspots to support the technology needs of its student body. The network also created six-week paper packets and learning agendas with leveled at-home libraries for each child to keep students engaged in the short term while the team formulated their long-term virtual approach.

While the students began the closure period working through these materials, leadership “locked themselves in a room” to build a model. They created Impact at Home, an online instruction plan to seamlessly move classroom instruction and goals to an online platform. They took two weeks to train teachers to deliver Impact at Home learning, specifically focusing on how to build a classroom culture in K-2 classrooms. The school also created instructional videos for students in different languages to support asynchronous learning during this time.

Based on the governor’s direction, Impact started the 2020-21 year on August 24 with all students at home. They will benefit from an updated Impact at Home model, which employs full-time distance learning similar to the spring, but with more synchronous components batched together in the schedule, to assist with family schedules. Impact has committed to offering families one-on-one, socially distant, in-person visits with teachers every six weeks. These visits will allow parents and scholars to connect with teachers for deeper social emotional learning and retrieve new materials and books. Currently, these visits take place outdoors. Through a community partnership, Impact is providing full-day childcare to its families in its Tukwila school building until the school opens for in-person, full-time instruction.



BEST PRACTICE

Impact Public Schools invested in faculty as a top priority for ensuring distance learning was effective.

Impact Public Schools supports teachers in providing high-quality instruction in two ways: providing relevant training and skill building, and creating structures to help teachers balance their home obligations.

Prior to starting Impact at Home, Impact provided staff with two weeks of training to help them adapt to distance learning. During this time, teachers and staff received training on supporting families, transferring positive culture to a distance learning classroom, and building technology skills.

“*Excellence in scholars starts with excellence in adults.*”
 –Jen Wickens, CEO and co-founder
 of Impact Public Schools

Impact also supported teacher effectiveness by continuing its existing training systems, including its coaching structure. Coaches observed teachers biweekly, then teachers and coaches discussed the coach’s observations. The feedback that teachers received was similar to in-person instruction (e.g., pacing, number of minutes on each content area). Impact also provided summer professional development content focused on building teachers’ instructional effectiveness. Professional development sessions blend asynchronous and synchronous sessions, giving teachers the opportunity to experience sessions in the same way a student might. In other words, teachers’ own development content was delivered with a mix of instructional practices that they use to teach students. Video studies and articles, for example, were asynchronous, while discussion groups and practice and feedback sessions were synchronous.

Finally, Impact created policies to support teachers with children. Teachers with school-age children of their own may have non-Impact children join an Impact classroom, whether their own or another teacher’s. And teachers whose children are Impact scholars can choose to have those scholars in their own classrooms or in the classroom of their current teacher.



BEST PRACTICE

Impact prioritized building community and connectedness among students through a variety of avenues.

Impact is deeply committed to creating a community within a virtual environment. Part of the network’s strategy involved investing in training and professional development to build teachers’ skills in this area. In the two weeks of training prior to the start of Impact at Home, teachers received focused content on how to build a culture in a K-2 virtual classroom. Teachers were encouraged to think of the beginning of distance learning as if it were the beginning of a new school year: Routines and practices needed to be established and ingrained anew.

To further build community, Impact developed structures to create a school-like environment for students. It established, for example, a Google Site that served as the “front door” of Impact at Home. Impact leadership wanted a distance learning platform that would be easy for young students to use,

but didn't find anything among the existing platforms that met their needs. The site they created is intuitive and visual; students click on their teacher's face to move into their content, almost as if they were greeting their teacher at the beginning of the day.

The network also created Impact at Home Radio, on the low-cost platform radio.co, to guide students throughout the day. Impact at Home Radio streams while students work. Most of the time the station is silent, except for transition times between sessions, at which point a scheduled message from the principal plays, encouraging students to move to their next session. The radio station mimics students' experiences with adults in the physical classroom. As one teacher said, "[Impact at Home Radio] allowed us to infuse joy into the day. Normally, when students come to the school building, the principal greets every scholar. With the Impact at Home radio station, every morning, scholars still hear a warm joyful message from the principal as they start their day."

Impact also sought to create a community within virtual school through classroom-specific strategies. Teachers hosted project-based learning show-and-tell sessions on Zoom, for example, where students presented a slide sharing a project they recently completed. Parents were invited to these sessions, as they would be if the show-and-tell were happening in the school building. Impact also shifted its staffing structure so that one of the teachers from the student's current classroom will loop with them to the next grade, creating continuity for students and families and a foundation for relationships between teachers and scholars in the new school year.

"[Impact at Home Radio] allowed us to infuse joy into the day. Normally, when students come to the school building, the principal greets every scholar. With the Impact at Home radio station, every morning, scholars still hear a warm joyful message from the principal as they start their day."

—Teacher, Impact Public Schools



BEST PRACTICE

Prior to COVID-19, Impact integrated social-emotional support into its model; this investment in social-emotional learning continued after schools closed.

Both before and after building closures, Impact students engaged in dedicated social-emotional learning time and mindfulness practice. Each week, scholars participate in Circle, a structured time that gives students the opportunity to practice mindfulness, empathy, gratitude, trust, and bravery. Beginning in kindergarten, scholars are building sophisticated socioemotional skills in Circle. Scholars practice how to empathize with complex emotions, make meaningful connections to another scholar's

experience, listen to understand their peers' current emotional state, offer support to a struggling friend, and express gratitude to a community member. Circle is a safe place for students to practice these skills and to build connections with their peers. These skills are encouraged, incorporated, and reinforced throughout the academic day.

Circle continued during distance learning. Circle provided a structured meeting model, used across schools and ages, that supported participants' emotional health. Teachers noted Circle time was a vital connection point with their students during distance learning.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

One of Impact's greatest strengths during distance learning was its attendance and engagement. Student attendance after school closures was just as high as it was in the brick-and-mortar environment — 94%. Attendance remained high in part because Impact was able to provide students and families with a degree of stability and normalcy during the initial stages of the pandemic. The network quickly provided families with a clear road map for distance learning, and Impact at Home mirrored students' in-school experience. "Impact had a plan for distance learning instantly," said one teacher. "School leadership didn't panic." Impact also continued to prioritize relationships with families and students, such as through teacher/student mentor groups and town hall meetings for parents.

“Impact had a plan for distance learning instantly. School leadership didn't panic.”
 —Teacher, Impact Public Schools

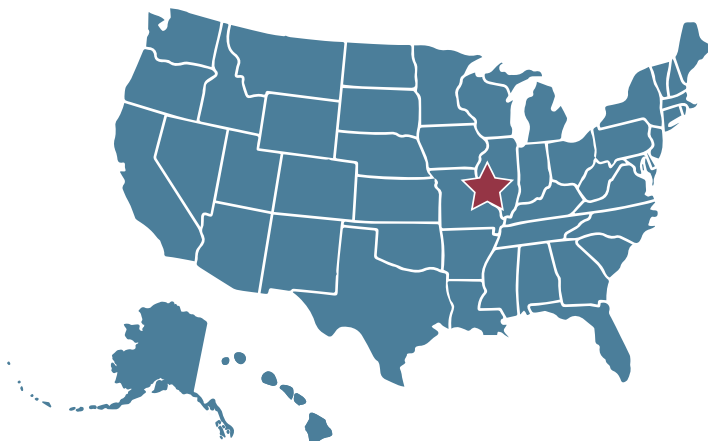
A challenge for Impact was the potential for school leader burnout. Implementing the Impact at Home model required intense investment from school leaders. Anticipating that distance learning would continue into the fall, school leaders were simultaneously trying to prepare for an unknown future, anticipate the potential scenarios, and take steps to mitigate the negative effects of each one. Doing so was emotionally and mentally taxing. Impact has taken steps to support self-care of its teachers, but hopes to do so for its school leaders, as well.

A key open question for Impact is how to track student progress. In the past, Impact administered NWEA MAP and Fountas & Pinnell; neither was available this past year. Impact used data from other sources (e.g., Lexia, Amira, DreamBox), but these assessments are designed to serve a different function. Moving forward, it will continue to explore how best to monitor student progress until students can return and take in-person assessments.

Promising Practices
Kairos Academies

Location: St. Louis, MO

Location Type: Urban



Student Demographics

American Indian	1%
Asian	6%
Black	55%
Latinx	5%
White	22%
2 or More Races	22%
Economically Disadvantaged	69%
English Learners	1%
Students with Disabilities	12%
Students with Unstable Housing	10%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Type: Charter

Grades Served: 6 and 7 (added in 2020)

Enrollment: 120 in 2019-20, 230 in 2020-21



School Highlights

Innovating instructional content and approaches

Designing data-intensive approaches

Creating supportive school-student connections

Kairos Academies was in its first year of operation in St. Louis, Missouri, when the COVID-19 closure hit in mid-March 2020. A “diverse by design” charter school, Kairos Academies was serving just over 100 sixth-graders at that point, but roughly doubled its enrollment and teaching staff for 2020-21. Kairos Academies uses research-based restorative justice practices and the Summit Learning curriculum, while following a year-round model of school attendance. Kairos students attend school on seven-week cycles: five weeks of learning followed by two weeks off, for a total of seven cycles. Teachers and staff use one of the two off weeks for administrative and professional development activities, including analyzing student data from the previous five weeks and iterating where needed for the next cycle of instruction.

Kairos called its virtual school Kairos Oikoi, meaning “Kairos at Home” or “Opportunity at Home.” When distance learning started, students already had access to Chromebooks and had experience learning independently using technology.

Kairos Academies began the school year on August 17 with its first five week cycle which concluded September 11. Kairos Academies offered three options for students this fall:

- **Blended learning:** Students attend school in person either Monday/Thursday or Tuesday/Friday. Projects and clubs occur on these days. On Wednesday, all students receive virtual targeted tutoring and enrichment. Students engage in self-directed learning on the other days they are not in person. Seventy percent of Kairos families chose this option.
- **100 percent supervised:** Students attend school in person on their two scheduled in-person days. Kairos is working with external partners to offer students in-person supervision at a safe site on the other three days.
- **100 percent virtual:** Students videoconference into school during their two scheduled in-person days. Each student has an in-class “buddy” to help include them in the in-class learning activities.



BEST PRACTICE

All Kairos Academies students have a “coach” who serves as their primary contact point and supporting adult in the school.

Prior to distance learning, Kairos Academies used a coaching model with students. Every adult in the building supported a “pod” of about ten students; people who had fewer instructional or administrative responsibilities had more students in their pod. This one-on-one coaching relationship created a deep connection and sense of accountability between student and adult. Coaches also served as the primary conduit between the school and the parent, connecting with families every week.

In distance learning, Kairos invested even more heavily in its coaching model, seeing these relationships as a lever for success and support for students during uncertain times. During Kairos Oikoi, coaches checked in with students every day. Mondays were reserved for longer check-ins, where students and coaches discussed the previous and next week's goals. From these meetings, coaches updated the leadership team on their students' progress on accountability goals.

The length and content of check-ins differed depending on the student. Students were grouped based on the degree of support they needed (low, middle, and high), based on previous check-in data and students' academic progress. Students in the high-support group, for example, spent longer every day working with coaches to develop their goals for the next day, while low-support students did shorter check-ins with coaches every day and otherwise guided their own progress toward goals throughout the week. A key tenet of Kairos Academies' coaching model is immediacy, so daily interactions were crucial for developing positive habits.

This model looked similar for diverse learners, who are fully integrated into the general student experience at Kairos Academies but with key adaptations. Students with IEPs received 1:1 and small group support from special education-certified staff and contractors during certain general education classes. Students also had participated in office hours and 1:1 and small group instruction with a special education specialist, and received virtual 1:1 related services (occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and counseling). The director of neurodiversity advised coaches and teachers on how best to fully utilize the range of services for their students.



BEST PRACTICE

Kairos Academies strategically adapted its instructional program to distance learning so that students could continue to access core subject and enrichment content.

When distance learning began, Kairos Academies was about to start the fifth seven-week cycle of its academic year. School leadership made two crucial instructional choices during this cycle to support students' online learning: differentiating content based on student progress and providing enrichment content. Both instructional approaches were continued throughout the closure, with iterative changes made to better meet student needs throughout the school year.

When Kairos Academies transitioned to distance learning, it grouped students into either "Acceleration" or "Boost" groups for each of the core subject areas based on whether they were on- or off-track in that subject. Students in the on-track Acceleration group completed supplemental, weeklong learning projects. Students in the Boost group focused their work in their off-track

content areas. These content areas were determined based on students' content knowledge and cognitive school growth, measured through assessments and rubric-graded projects. Teachers concurrently taught both groups norms for distance learning that would support their engagement and learning, such as how to engage in an online discussion. About 80% of students did Boost sessions during distance learning, but Boost students were able to join Acceleration classes as they completed assignments in Boost sessions.

Kairos iterated on this process by regrouping kids daily instead of weekly to target remediation and student support. It used Summit Learning assessments, NWEA MAP, and qualitative data to identify which kids needed to deepen fluency with which skills or topics.

Kairos Academies also offered daily enrichment activities to complement core subjects. Enrichment activities were optional for students and initially only consisted of structured, synchronous content with few parameters. Midway through the cycle, however, the school began offering independent studies as a new activity. Each independent study was a self-guided series of activities, culminating in a final product from students. Independent study topics included coding, chess, elections, drawing, and yoga. Completing these activities qualified students for various academic honors at the end of the year, such as honor roll and a badge on their report card. In one survey, students named the virtual field trips and explorations as one of their favorite parts of distance learning.



BEST PRACTICE

Kairos Academies employed a data-informed prototyping cycle to improve its processes and strategies to effectively support students.

Kairos Academies regularly collects a comprehensive set of data points to understand how well it is serving its students. It focuses on four key categories of data: academic, attendance, coaching, and culture. Coaching and culture data are as crucial as attendance and academic data. Coaching data track how often students met with their coach and how long meetings lasted. For culture data, they use a program called Kickboard, rewarding points to students who were doing well on cultural goals and analyzing students low on the points board for ways to better support them.

While all these measures existed prior to distance learning, attendance and coaching metrics emerged as more important during closure. Kairos also focused on its contact points with parents, how many accountability goals students met, and student self-reported satisfaction metrics such as mood, motivation, and their excitement about projects and independent studies. Finally, student participation was tracked in one of the school's restorative practices, called community circle.

Staff discussed these data every day during morning huddles. They examined the previous day, but they also highlighted weekly and cyclical trends. During huddles, staff only looked at individual students when their attendance, academics, or culture data were particularly low. Team leaders decided which data to discuss that day.

These collaborative data discussions produced strategies and practices that improved Kairos Academies' educational model during distance learning. The director of teaching and learning, for example, personally reached out to students who were on the "bubble" between off- and on-track, with their coach copied, pushing them to complete the final work required to be on-track. Kairos also revised its approach to measuring attendance. Initially, teachers tracked attendance at some point during each class. After attendance rates were lower than they had hoped, teachers began taking attendance within the first five minutes of class, and then the operations staff would send out messages to the parents of absent students. This strategy helped improve attendance.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

One of Kairos Academies' strengths in distance learning was its differentiated approach to student learning. Its coaching model provided the foundation for individualized support and ensures that students have a plan and the resources they need to master content and skills. Instruction was differentiated in various ways depending on student situation and need. Modified assessments were created in Google Classroom, students took tests while on video with their coach or special education specialist, and additional instructional materials were created or found in real time and delivered to students as needed. As student data and feedback passed between teacher, coaches, and the director of neurodiversity, additional instruction was added to student schedules. Kairos also leveraged online tools, such as MobyMax, in order to further increase direct instruction and ensure students were making progress toward IEP goals.

A key challenge for Kairos Academies this past spring, however, was its project-based learning. Project-based learning is a key component of the school's model, but one that it struggled to translate into a virtual environment. In the first cycle of Kairos Oikoi, Kairos Academies' leadership made the decision to suspend projects to focus on the Boost and Acceleration projects. Teachers adapted the Boost content to fit the virtual setting and created supplemental projects for the virtual Acceleration classes.

Conventional projects began again in Cycle 6, with teachers creatively adapting projects to leverage online resources that were accessible to all students. For example, they adapted a roller coaster project. In the physical classroom, students would have built marble runs; in distance learning, students used virtual simulators to build roller coasters. Students could use anything from Minecraft to PhEt simulations as long as the tool allowed a coaster to be built. All of the content-related assignments (e.g., tracking energy transfer throughout the coaster) were able to stay the same.

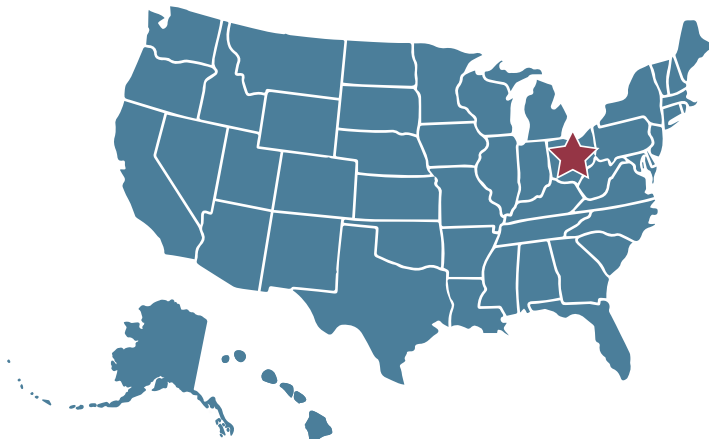
Finally, a question that Kairos Academies is working toward answering over the upcoming cycles is how to effectively track student attendance during distance learning. During Kairos Oikoi, Kairos Academies measured attendance based on whether students showed up to class and turned on their video. The school averaged 84% attendance throughout the two cycles of Oikoi, although it was lower at the beginning and rose throughout as it figured out more creative ways to engage and support students and families.

As it moved to a blended model, Kairos Academies continued to reassess how to measure attendance. For example, it is exploring whether attendance during certain self-directed periods is necessary, or if mastery should be the primary measure. If a student ultimately masters a specific skill, does the timing matter? Kairos Academies is working to balance high expectations for students with flexibility and understanding of students' contexts.

Promising Practices
KIPP Columbus High

Location: Columbus, OH

Location Type: Urban



Student Demographics

Asian	6%
Black	88%
Latinx	5%
White	2%
2 or More Races	3%
Economically Disadvantaged	42%
English Learners	4%
Students with Disabilities	14%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Type: Charter (part of the KIPP Public Charter Schools network)

Grades Served: 9-12

Enrollment: 200



School Highlights

Innovating instructional content and approaches

Creating supportive school-student connections

Building relationships with families and community

Founded in 2016, KIPP Columbus High is part of a larger 125-acre KIPP campus serving more than 2,000 kids from infancy to high school in northeast Columbus, Ohio.

Prior to the COVID-19 closure, KIPP Columbus High had a strong technology foundation, including devices for each of its students. When it moved to distance learning in mid-March, teachers were given increased autonomy to self-direct their courses and decide how to deliver instruction. The only requirement was for each student to be given daily learning opportunities accompanied by videos and human connection points. Students began each week with Google Classroom, which had a remote learning dashboard updated by 8 a.m. on Monday.

During summer 2020, KIPP Columbus High families selected one of two learning model options: full distance learning (called KIPP at Home) or a hybrid model (called KIPP on Campus). Close to 40% of families selected KIPP on Campus; the remaining 60% selected KIPP at Home. However, on August 24, all KIPP Columbus High students began KIPP at Home. School and network leadership will consider offering KIPP on Campus starting in October, contingent on health and safety guidelines. At that point, students enrolled in KIPP on Campus will return to physical classrooms. Students enrolled in KIPP at Home will continue with that program through December and have the option of selecting a different model for the second semester later this fall.

Additionally, the “KIPP Cares Center” opened August 31 for parents who wanted in-person support for any KIPP student, Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m. with an opportunity to extend to 6 p.m. Initially the plans are to serve up to 135 students at no cost to families. Students receive healthy meals, support with their online classes, and the chance to engage in extended learning activities



BEST PRACTICE

KIPP Columbus’ virtual advisories gave students a community and “home base” within the otherwise isolated distance learning context.

Prior to distance learning, KIPP Columbus High used advisory groups to provide a small group of students with a consistent connection point with a KIPP adult. These groups feature 10 to 15 students for each teacher or staff member. When the pandemic closed schools, these advisory groups continued, but were redesigned based on teacher workload, existing deep relationships with students, and how easy or challenging students were to reach.

The advisory groups served two main purposes: information and support. Advisers served as liaisons between the school and the student and their families. They collected information from a variety of sources including weekly grade-level team meetings and morning staff meetings, and then disseminated important information to the students and parents.

For most advisers, the key role they played was providing “wraparound” support for students, physically, emotionally, and academically. Initially, each adviser checked in on students’ health and well-being. They helped families navigate the pandemic or connected them to social services where necessary. Students could reach out to advisers with technology problems or for a one-to-one meeting if their school work or engagement needed a boost. Special education students could meet with both their adviser and case manager to discuss challenges and resolve learning issues.

In addition to providing a one-on-one contact point between students and families, the advisory groups became a community of students supporting each other’s social-emotional health and in overall well-being. The groups met informally to keep connected outside of academics. This included group chats and FaceTime calls, binge-watch parties of popular television series, and game nights via Zoom. The goal was to add a source of fun and connection at a time when, as teenagers, distance learning felt particularly isolating.

Going forward, to provide continuity, these advisory groups will “loop.” The current teacher or staff adviser will stay with the same group of students through the next year and, ideally, throughout their entire experience at KIPP Columbus High.



BEST PRACTICE

KIPP Columbus focused on student engagement as central to distance learning and student achievement.

KIPP Columbus High kept the majority of its students engaged in distance learning on operational, academic, and social-emotional levels. Its attendance rates, while not on par with its previous in-person attendance rate, stabilized as it focused on student engagement. Teachers were able to track attendance through Google Classroom, where they could see what classes students were attending and how long they were spending on content. Teachers also relied on the virtual advisory groups to track participation and follow up with students who failed to meet with their group. Advisers reached out to absent students and their parents, if needed, and provided additional academic support for students indicating a need.

A committee system approach was central to support and encourage student engagement. Committees were composed of KIPP Columbus staff members and have been expanded to include students this fall. For example, the Senior Shine Committee ensured that seniors felt supported and appreciated on their way to graduation, providing yard signs for all graduates and supporting “drive-thru” graduation festivities. And the Advanced Placement (AP) Committee engaged students in continuing their studying and completing their AP testing. KIPP Columbus High set a goal that 90% of students in AP classes would participate in the exam. With the help of this committee, KIPP Columbus High met that goal. The AP Computer Science Principles class, through which students could earn college credit, had a notably strong showing. Twenty-eight students completed this task, which doubled the number of students receiving computer science college credit compared to last year.

Finally, attendance and engagement were supported through social worker outreach and the consistent oversight of advisers who flagged issues they saw with their students.



BEST PRACTICE

KIPP Columbus shifted its instructional strategy during distance learning to support students reaching grade-level mastery.

Early on in the closure period, KIPP Columbus High took on a “learning acceleration” approach to distance learning, using TNTP’s Learning Acceleration Guide as a starting point. Initially, this work was a strategy to continue meeting the needs of many of its diverse learners — particularly students with disabilities and students who were falling behind on core instructional content — but the school now uses the learning acceleration model to inform instructional practices for all students.

In the learning acceleration model, KIPP Columbus High identified areas where students had gaps that were preventing them from reaching grade-level mastery. Teachers targeted their instructional content to specific hard and soft skills that build toward meeting the grade-level standard. Overall, the goal was to provide better scaffolding so that the student could be successful. For example: A math teacher working on an Algebra 1 long equation noted that a student’s multiplication skills were behind grade level. Traditionally, the teacher would drop that student down to a different class to build multiplication skills. Instead, under this strategy, the teacher and a specialist worked together to plan for extra supports so that the student could remain in the Algebra 1 class. These included co-teaching classes, enabling the specialist to break off a small group for more tailored instruction. In another approach, the lead teacher introduced concepts, then during application the class broke into smaller groups to work together, with teachers in each group.

“The pandemic forced us to get better at accelerating student learning.”

—Alex Thanos, School Leader

The school supplemented this strategy by having teachers stagger their office hours so that they wouldn't conflict with students attending multiple sessions to reinforce the new content they were learning. Students then could attend office hours for scaffolding and priming to address remaining gaps. Additionally, teachers offered specific office hours available only to students with diverse needs. Because of this tailored strategy, students benefited from additional time and support from teachers who were focused on ensuring students achieved grade-level mastery.

This fall, based on the success from the spring, KIPP Columbus High further invested in this acceleration strategy and improved its implementation across the school. As with any new strategy, in the spring the school saw some disparity across educators regarding consistency of support and delivery, so the school worked to ensure they were ready for a full-school rollout. To that end, KIPP Columbus High has an acceleration team that meets weekly to plan how to teach both online and in person. They have developed tools, such as templates and exemplars, illustrating how acceleration looks. School leadership and teachers are optimistic about the continued impact of accelerated learning to help students attain mastery.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

One strength for KIPP Columbus High was the “equitable opportunity” bonus. Mid-closure, the state of Ohio sent out guidelines that final grades could not be lower than what the student had achieved in the first three quarters. Because of this, school leadership was concerned that students might disengage from distance learning. In response, KIPP Columbus High created the equitable opportunity bonus. Students could earn an extra 5% on their cumulative three-quarter average by meeting teacher-designed coursework goals. Effectively, this approach incentivized students to engage in distance learning while not punishing students who failed to participate.

Unfortunately, even with this bonus, KIPP Columbus High struggled to engage traditionally underserved students, as the overall attendance rate dropped a bit from the physical classroom numbers. Teachers' instructional experience was that lessons delivered online worked for those who engaged with them, but that there were students who never logged on. It took a disproportionate amount of a teacher's time trying to reach out to students who failed to engage. In particular, this was challenging for dedicated educators balancing their time between serving students who were fully engaged and learning, and trying to draw in those students who were disconnected. Because of the KIPP advisory groups and weekly check-ins with families, teachers knew that the students who were least engaged were often those who required the most support.

The open question for KIPP Columbus High and its teachers was to figure out how to create a cohesive, consistent “school day” for both KIPP at Home and KIPP on Campus. One teacher this summer explained it this way: “How do I take what I did this year in distance learning and transfer it into next year? How should I start the year? This year I knew the students and they knew my system and rhythm — but how do I adapt when that’s not the case? It’ll be like starting over.”

“*How do I take what I did this year in distance learning and transfer it into next year? How should I start the year? This year I knew the students and they knew my system and rhythm — but how do I adapt when that’s not the case? It’ll be like starting over.*”

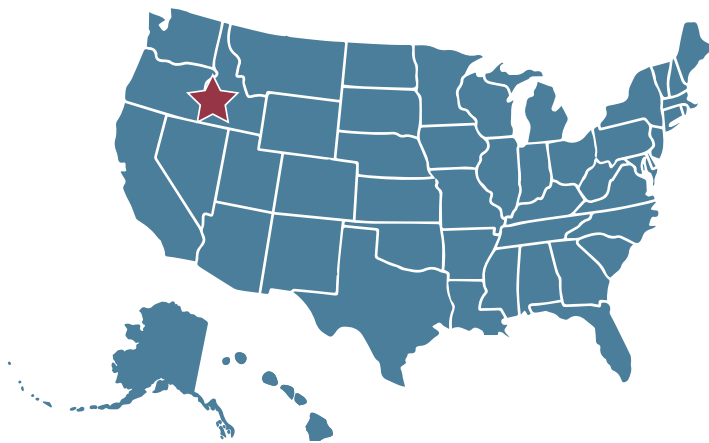
-Teacher, KIPP Columbus High

Promising Practices

Nampa School District #131

Location: Nampa, ID

Location Type: Suburb of Boise



Student Demographics

Latinx	29%
Other	6%
White	65%
Economically Disadvantaged	63%
English Learners	13%
Homeless	4%
Students with Disabilities	12%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Type: Traditional district

Grades Served: Pre-K to 12

Enrollment: 14,168



School Highlights

Innovating instructional content and approaches

Serving special student populations

Big-picture planning and establishing core principles

Nampa School District, located in a suburb of Boise, was one of only a few Idaho districts that offered its students nine weeks of instruction post-closure. To do this, it leaned heavily on leadership and staff to support students and families while professional learning communities of teachers collaborated to drive content knowledge.

Technological preparedness also paved the way for Nampa to transition from traditional in-person classrooms to distance learning. The district began a one-to-one student-device match in the fall of 2016 and invested resources, like funding an instructional technology coach role, to support teachers in more effectively leveraging technology. The final phase of the 1-1 implementation was completed in the fall of 2019. Superintendent Paula Kellerer said, “We had the head knowledge accumulated over four years of professional development, and in March we got to jump in and practice in the deep end of the pool.”

“We had the head knowledge accumulated over four years of professional development, and in March we got to jump in and practice in the deep end of the pool.”

–Paula Kellerer, Superintendent

After closure, the district narrowed essential outcomes for the fourth quarter to what it could reasonably expect to accomplish. Grade-level teams at each school completed a review of standards and thoughtfully considered which standards were most needed for students to move into the next grade. Instructional practices varied by grade level. Elementary students followed a schedule of synchronous learning time (with grade level maximum daily online time limits) mixed with asynchronous assignments. Middle and high school students met synchronously during their regular block schedules, but with much of their learning occurring asynchronously. Materials, books, and assignments were accessed digitally. Adjustments were made iteratively to this approach based on feedback from students and teachers throughout the spring.

The Nampa School District created a reopening plan for this fall after collecting feedback from a wide range of stakeholders and experts. Unfortunately, due to increased COVID-19 cases in Idaho, it was forced to open 100% virtually, and delayed the start of school to August 24 to allow teachers to prepare and connect with students in advance of classes starting. Beginning September 21, students will return to part-time in-person learning via a hybrid model. Students will come to school in person two days a week; half on Mondays and Thursdays, and half on Tuesdays and Fridays. Wednesdays will continue to be professional development and planning days where no new material is introduced. During days they are not in school, students will work online. This model allows for social distancing by cutting class sizes in half.

**BEST PRACTICE**
Nampa School District balances cohesion across the district with individual school and teacher autonomy and flexibility to respond to student needs.

Under normal circumstances, district leadership teams around the country struggle with reconciling potentially competing priorities: ensuring consistency across the district while granting schools and teachers the autonomy to respond to student needs. COVID-19 exacerbated that challenge, and the stakes that go along with it.

Nampa School District addressed this challenge during closure by clearly defining the “nonnegotiables” that must be implemented and granting schools and teachers freedom to determine their path to upholding those nonnegotiables. The district, school leadership, and teachers refer to this approach as “tight and loose” — the “tight” defines what must be accomplished, and the “loose” allows schools and teachers to define how they will accomplish it.

District leadership created this guidance, detailed in a shared document, in part because they recognized that they do not have all the answers, particularly on best practices in distance learning, and that schools and teachers are crucial thought partners in determining how best to serve students in this context. The tight-loose document was created through collaboration among district staff, school building leadership, and teachers. This honest and transparent collaborative process fostered school and teacher trust in the district.

Example of Online Learning Tight-Loose Document

ELEMENTARY	TIGHT (required)	LOOSE
Synchronous/ Asynchronous instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • K-2 literacy instruction must have a face-to-face component (large group, small group, or 1-1). • To the degree possible, most of the instruction should be asynchronous. • Note: Synchronous instruction also includes any paced delivery of instruction (timed, digital delivery via an instructional platform not provided by the teacher) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning meetings • Office hours, regular, recurring • Small group instruction

**BEST PRACTICE****Nampa School District employed a multipronged approach to effectively supporting English learner students.**

Nampa School District uses a co-teaching model to support its English learner (EL) students. Students are enrolled in EL classrooms, which have up to 30% English learners in each. EL classrooms have two teachers: a lead teacher who provides the majority of instruction, and a teacher who focuses on supporting EL students. The EL teacher spends an average of 45 minutes in each EL classroom. An EL teacher floats between classrooms and works with multiple co-teachers across grade levels.

During distance learning, EL teachers supported EL students in four main ways: full-class instruction, small groups, video vocabulary and writing lessons, and communication with families.

During full-class instruction, EL teachers complemented lead teachers' instruction. The EL teacher modeled effective strategies to support EL students, such as storytelling or questioning techniques. Through co-teaching, lead teachers build skills for working with EL students by observing and co-planning lessons with the EL teacher.

During small group meetings, the EL teacher helped EL students with assignments from their classes. Small groups met via video for an hour twice a week – one day spent on English and the second day on math. The EL teacher tailored small group time to student needs. For example, in math, students often struggled with word problems; the EL teacher would work with students to decode the language and connect it back to the math operation needed to solve the problem.

EL teachers also developed video lessons, particularly to support vocabulary development. Teachers created videos that combined direct instruction and student practice opportunities. Teachers included pauses in the videos, for example, so that students could repeat words on their own. Students also uploaded videos of themselves showing that they understood the word, by doing things like completing a sentence frame or showing an object in their house that related to the word. These video lessons were crucial for language building, a key struggle that schools faced during distance learning.

Finally, EL teachers supported students' development by also supporting their families. EL teachers conducted regular check-in calls, provided technical support, hosted Q&A sessions specifically for Spanish-speaking families, translated content, and had one-on-one video meetings with families of students who were especially struggling.

**BEST PRACTICE****Nampa School District redeployed classified staff to form a system of support for students.**

Like many schools, Nampa School District had an “it takes a village” approach to distance learning. “All staff contribute to the mission of our district,” said Superintendent Paula Kellerer. “They are an essential part of who we are and what we do. But some staff don’t have jobs to do if students aren’t physically there.” The district redeployed classified staff to perform functions necessary to effectively deliver distance learning, even if those functions were outside of their job descriptions. The goal of this strategy was twofold: create a wraparound system of support for students, and eliminate staff layoffs.

Many classified staff served as home-to-school liaisons. They connected with families, conducting safety checks, supporting food access, and addressing issues with students who were not engaged. Paraprofessionals, for example, were assigned a grade-level cohort of students, reaching out to those students and families every day. This practice allowed community liaisons, who would normally do this work, to focus on students and families with the highest needs and to deliver meals to students. Front office staff focused specifically on outreach to students who were chronically disengaged, using email and phone calls and coordinating in-person wellness checks for those students. Nampa also redeployed IT staff, who historically have provided on-site services for devices, to staff a 24-hour technical support help desk for parents.

Nampa was intentional about supporting other staff connected to the district. The district increased the pay for food service workers, for example, as a way to acknowledge their front-line role. And the district renegotiated a contract with the company that provides busing to allow the company to reallocate funding so that it could stay in business.

Nampa made these strategic personnel decisions in part because of its investment in the community, but while doing so, developed a network of support for students within the district, which was particularly crucial in an isolated virtual environment.

“*All staff contribute to the mission of our district. They are an essential part of who we are and what we do. But some staff don’t have jobs to do if students aren’t physically there.*”
–Paula Kellerer, Superintendent

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

One of Nampa School District's key strengths is its leveraging of technology to support students with speech therapy goals on their IEPs. The district purchased a new type of software, for example, so that speech language pathologists (SLPs) could deliver the appropriate services, and partnered with a local company to access a HIPAA-required platform so that speech language pathologists could deliver services via telehealth. One SLP complemented direct teletherapy with recorded homework, through which students recorded audio samples of their practicing with a parent. As a result, these students received all of their support in a one-on-one or two-to-one student-to-SLP ratio, rather than in groups. In a brick and mortar school, due to scheduling constraints, therapists are frequently forced to conduct therapy in small groups. In the virtual world, therapists could deliver specific instruction to individual students because they did not have to work around the brick and mortar schedule. Another SLP saw multiple children from one family. Prior to school closures, she saw these students separately in their respective grade-level groups, but when COVID-19 forced teletherapy, she saw all students at once. In doing so, she was able to identify new opportunities for interventions that she hadn't seen previously when working with the students separately.

At the same time, one of the challenges that Nampa must address moving forward is how to support the highest-need students with disabilities, such as students who are medically fragile. In 2020, staff were able to work with those students virtually to achieve basic outcomes, but district leadership believes there is more to do to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all students.

Student assessment was another challenge that Nampa encountered. When distance learning started, the district didn't have the assessments necessary to determine, in a virtual environment, if a student had mastered a specific skill. Teachers had to adapt their assessment strategies to distance learning, which proved difficult and did not consistently provide accurate information about student progress. Identifying ways to assess and address unfinished learning is a key priority this school year.

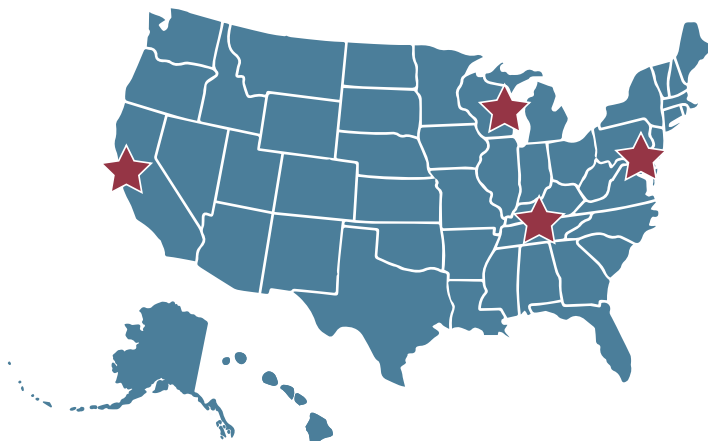
An open question for Nampa is how to support students' social-emotional health. The district prioritizes building students' skills in these areas, including resiliency and self-regulation. Nampa also strives to support students navigating through negative emotions and to foster healthy habits for dealing with stressful circumstances, focusing on skills such as how to communicate productively, process and deal with new information and stressors, and maintain a sense of normalcy without the routines of a classroom environment. Finding resources for parents is another way of providing support. But it's unclear how to achieve these goals in a virtual environment, particularly without putting too large of a burden on teachers, who are facing their own struggles with the current world. Nampa provided additional teacher and staff training on SEL this fall to help meet these needs.

Promising Practices

Rocketship Public Schools

Location: Bay Area, CA; Milwaukee, WI; Nashville, TN; and Washington, D.C.

Location Type: Urban



School Type: Charter network

Grades Served: Pre-K to 5 (varies slightly by location)

Enrollment: 10,000

Student Demographics

Asian	10%
Black	24%
Latinx	60%
Other	6%
White	2%
Economically Disadvantaged	76%
English Learners	13%
Homeless	6%
Students with Disabilities	45%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Highlights

Providing human capital support and adjustments

Designing data-intensive approaches

Focusing on social-emotional learning

Rocketship Public Schools, founded in 2007 in California's Bay Area, now serves nearly 10,000 students in three states and the District of Columbia. Rocketship's model relies on personalized learning, with teachers leading the learning process for each student through a blend of whole group grade-level instruction and one-on-one and small group differentiated instruction. Students also work toward mastery of skills through independent learning, small group tutoring, and adaptive online learning programs.

After schools closed, Rocketship students spent the spring learning through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Rocketship leadership established clear, consistent routines for distance learning days to provide students a schedule similar to in-person learning. Schools posted grade-level schedules on the Rocketship website for both students and teachers, and each school continued to host Launch and Landing (beginning- and end-of-day full-school assemblies), daily celebrations, and live lunch. Rocketship continued to use its online learning programs (OLPs), which had been a core part of instructional content prior to distance learning. And throughout the distance learning period, Rocketship maintained strong connections with its students and families.

For the fall of 2020, Rocketship aligned with local school district guidelines, choosing to open with full-time distance learning initially. Rocketship built on the strengths developed last spring and implemented new features to further enhance student learning at home. The network adjusted its bell schedules and instructional blocks, for example, to accommodate distance learning schedules. Instruction this fall includes an average of three hours of daily live teaching, daily small group instruction to meet individual needs of each student, and asynchronous learning opportunities to fit family schedules. Rocketship's academic program continues to follow standards-based, internally developed curricula for ELA and STEM, supplemented by its social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum and independent online learning programs. Each school held a Digital Learning Academy August 10-12 to train parents and caregivers on distance learning programs, schedules, and expectations.

**BEST PRACTICE**

Rocketship monitored student performance data from the start of distance learning and quickly shifted its approach in response to the data.

Rocketship students have weekly, individual performance goals for each online learning program (OLP); teachers use data from the OLPs to determine if students met their goals. Teachers use these data to provide 1:1 support and celebrate student successes. In the initial week following school closures, OLP data showed that students were struggling with distance learning and failing to meet their goals.

In response to these data, Rocketship took a step back and prioritized students' and families' basic needs before doubling down on students' learning and progress. Rocketship leadership created the Daily Wellness Check-in (DWC), a survey for parents that allowed teachers and staff to better understand if the student and family were engaged, safe, and supported. Every morning, Rocketship asked parents and caregivers:

Did your student participate in distance learning yesterday?

Do you want more info about COVID-related social services?

Do you feel safe at home?

The Daily Wellness Check-in surveys served two purposes: The DWCs showed Rocketship staff where to focus their energy and with what supports (e.g., share resources about accessing food banks and school lunch deliveries to families with food insecurity), and the DWCs emphasized the importance of online learning to students and families. The DWCs allowed Rocketship to better support families and to increase student engagement. Rocketship knew this effort was successful when it saw an increase in students logged in to online learning programs and student goal achievement as distance learning continued, and received feedback directly from their parents.

**BEST PRACTICE**

Rocketship invested in and supported children's social-emotional health.

As Rocketship pushed and supported students' academic progress, the network also prioritized social-emotional development, which was particularly crucial during the beginning stages of the pandemic. The network intensified its work on social-emotional learning (SEL) during distance learning, building on strong practices that existed while schools were still open.

To foster social-emotional learning, Rocketship provides a calendar outlining SEL topics schools should use to support their students. Each grade-level cohort selects a designated teacher to provide

an SEL exercise to the rest of the classroom staff. In some schools, this responsibility was rotated so that all grade-level teachers have a chance to lead an SEL training. These lessons were actionable exercises the teachers could share with their students, such as breathing techniques. In one school, teachers differentiated SEL strategies between lower and upper grades. Those teachers taught the youngest students in the lower grades the vocabulary to name their emotions, how to express those emotions in a healthy way, and how to tackle them productively.

Teachers also designed SEL activities based on their observations of student behaviors. The teacher would find, for example, appropriate exercises to help manage observed behavior – such as difficulty managing emotions when frustrated – and extend the training to the rest of the class. A typical SEL session began with a lesson for the day focused on one of these skills, followed by a group reading of a relevant book that centered on this skill, and ended with a hands-on activity for the students, such as drawing a picture about the skill or book, doing show-and-tell, or practicing self-calming techniques such as deep breathing or visualization of a peaceful place.

Teachers also developed SEL content that was responsive to the current moment. In particular, teachers supported students in grappling with events that might trigger strong emotions, such as the death of George Floyd. Teachers prioritized these topics, where possible, to help equip students with the habits they need to understand and process their reactions and emotions.

Rocketship learned from the spring that SEL was very important to students during distance learning. For the fall, it incorporated additional SEL time into the school day. It committed to beginning each day with live instruction of an SEL topic and ending each day with time for students and teachers to conduct a social-emotional check-in.



BEST PRACTICE

Rocketship took steps to support staff within and outside of virtual school.

Rocketship Public Schools leadership quickly recognized that, in addition to families and students, their own staff faced challenges during the pandemic; in response, the network took steps to support staff.

Rocketship focused on improving mental health and social services for staff. The school provided counseling services, and when the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) was enacted, Rocketship provided detailed guidance about the supports available under the legislation and how to access leave, if needed. Rocketship was up front and transparent about potentially negative effects that the pandemic might have on compensation. The network was ultimately able to provide full compensation for all staff, including hourly staff, through the end of the school year.

School leadership also adapted the school day schedule to create opportunities for teachers and staff to take care of themselves. They created space for staff to connect with each other, for example, through daily “morning huddles” (staff meetings) and one-on-one conversations with the assistant principals or coaches. Staff members were encouraged to “vent,” if needed, and to share their concerns about themselves and their students. One teacher who returned from family leave just prior to the COVID-19 closure shared, “I had just adjusted to being back in school, and then had to be back home again. It was really challenging. But my school leaders made sure we were okay.”

“My school leadership provided huge support for integrating self-care into our schedules.”
 –Teacher, Rocketship Public Schools

Similarly, Rocketship built self-care blocks into the daily schedule to ease the pressure on teachers. Initially, self-care blocks were allotted throughout the day on a structured schedule, necessitating that teachers take self-care at specific times. When teacher surveys indicated that they preferred flexibility in the timing of these blocks, Rocketship allowed teachers to adjust their schedules to take self-care blocks whenever it worked best for them. One teacher said, “My school leadership provided huge support for integrating self-care into our schedules. And they respected that time; they didn’t expect responses at all during self-care blocks.” This year’s schedule was designed to offer teachers professional development and self-care time one day a week while students participate in on-demand learning.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

Rocketship invested time and effort in making school feel fun and familiar, while adapting to the many challenges of distance learning. A key strength of its approach was continuing practices from its brick-and-mortar school combined with new distance learning components.

Rocketship continued to name a student of the month and parent of the month, mailing certificates to the winners and recognizing them through “shout-outs” at morning launch. Teachers hosted grade-appropriate virtual field trips and included parents in those trips for the younger grades. At one school, the kindergarten classes “time traveled,” with video clips of space and dinosaurs. Older students “visited” the San Diego Zoo “together” with video clips of animals, discussion time, and related reading and writing assignments. Asian-Pacific Islander Heritage Month was celebrated with slides each morning at launch celebrating cultural contributions. Afternoon Landing featured videos filmed by staff members and families sharing their own culture with the school. Regular daily and weekly school meetings and events held in person prior to closure were preserved through Zoom, including daily launch meetings with student shout-outs; student “lunch bunches” where kids could eat lunch virtually with a handful of their friends; and end-of-year ceremonies celebrating student transitions.

Rocketship also added components designed to engage students in distance learning, such as:

- Specialist teachers added new enrichment classes that could be done at home. One teacher demonstrated live “ABC” yoga, and a science teacher showed students how to create their own “slime.”
- Schools held online learning program parties every Friday to celebrate success. To be invited, students had to meet learning goals on four different OLPs (Lexia, LightSail, Freckle, and Reflex). For instance, on LightSail, which focuses on reading, students had to complete a certain number of reading minutes for the week. Students who met all four goals were invited to the online learning party that Friday. These parties had a DJ, dance battles, and challenges from Kahoot, an online learning game platform.
- Teachers also contributed in various ways using social media platforms. At one school, teachers recognized students through shout-outs on Facebook Live, while another school created a teacher TikTok. One teacher even agreed to dye his hair purple (Rocketship’s color) if students met their online learning goals — and he kept his promise when they did.

While Rocketship prioritized connections with students and will do so going forward, communication with families was not always smooth. Some parents felt that Rocketship communicated too frequently with parents, overwhelming them with multiple messages coming from multiple people and platforms. Some parents tuned out from the overload.

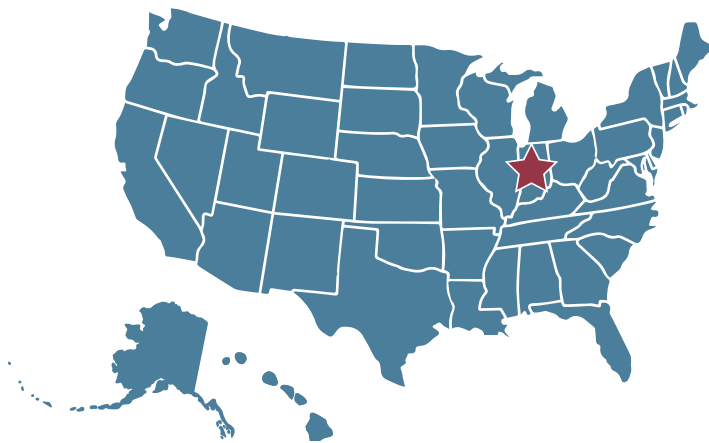
Rocketship created a unified platform for communicating with students and parents partway through the closure semester, called the Daily Learning Lab. But the Daily Learning Lab did not become the sole source of information, as it was intended. By the time the Daily Learning Lab launched, teachers had already created their own communication processes that parents were accustomed to using. Going forward, Rocketship plans to streamline communications through one or two platforms and clearly outline reasonable expectations for how much and how often parents will engage.

An open question for Rocketship was how to provide teachers with the support they need to learn new skills and adapt teaching for distance learning. Right now the answer has been to set aside nearly one full day per week for this support. On these days, no live teaching occurs after Launch and SEL lessons. Students complete independent work and OLPs. Teachers use that day for lesson planning and professional development, as well as self-care.

Promising Practices
Steel City Academy

Location: Gary, IN

Location Type: Small city



Student Demographics

Asian	10%
Black	94%
Latinx	3%
White	2%
2 or More Races	3%
English Learners	<1%
FRPL	100%
Students with Disabilities	1%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Type: Charter

Grades Served: K-2, 7-12

Enrollment: 475



School Highlights

Designing data-intensive approaches

Big-picture planning and establishing core principles

Steel City Academy opened in Gary, Indiana in 2016, serving students in grades seven and nine. Since then, the school has grown to enroll students in K-2 and 7-12.

Once a student enrolls in Steel City, they are assigned to a “squad” – a small group of students led by a Steel City staff member. Squad leaders are a mix of advocate, supporter, and accountability partner for each student. Squads create a consistent space to build community and relationships: Every day at Steel City starts with a squad meeting, and squads stay together as a cohort throughout their time at Steel City.

Like many schools, Steel City’s COVID-19 closure came in March 2020, a week before spring break. At that point, school leadership mobilized to acquire and distribute technology, which they did not have in place prior to closure, achieving 100% device and internet access within one week. The first week served as a beta test of totally asynchronous distance learning. Steel City leadership collected feedback from students, families, and staff on that first week and adjusted their model accordingly. After spring break, students followed a Monday through Thursday schedule of new content delivered synchronously. Friday was a “flex” day for both teachers and students, allowing them to catch up on work and reset.

Like many other schools, Steel City Academy created multiple options for the fall, but due to an increased transmission rate in the community, decided to open the year with most students participating in a fully virtual school. Steel City began virtual school on August 24. For the students and families who need in-person support the most, a small number of students participate in the building as part of Student Success Team “pods.” These Student Success Teams are focused on students such as those with IEPs, disengaged and retained students, and those students whose families are facing child care challenges.



BEST PRACTICE

Steel City grounded its approach to distance learning in four principles.

As Steel City Academy moved to distance learning in mid-March, it designed its approach to intentionally focus on four key principles, in which it grounded all of its decisions.

Steel City’s first and most important principle focused on students’ and families’ health and safety, ensuring they had all the resources they needed. School leadership anticipated many of their students and families would be vulnerable to the health and economic toll of a pandemic. Squad leaders tracked student attendance and connected with students to identify barriers students and families were facing. To do so, Steel City created a master tracker so teachers had visibility across all classes to locate

students who might be attending classes inconsistently. And school days ended with a “closing circle” video meeting, which created an opportunity to check in with students and caregivers. When a student or family identified a barrier or challenge to their health, well-being, or their ability to learn virtually, the teacher shared that concern with the school leadership team, who worked to provide resources to dismantle barriers. For example, if a parent lost a job, the counselors worked with them to apply for COVID-19 unemployment benefits.

Steel City’s second principle builds on the first and involves strengthening human connections by building relationships. It is not enough to be safe; relationships are needed to support students and families as they navigate “these wild and trauma-ridden times,” as Executive Director and Principal Katie Kirley said. The goal of this principle was to deliberately seek out opportunities to check in and build relationships, whether with students and families or internally with other teachers and staff. For example, some of the high school students worked during the day or watched younger siblings, so teachers offered evening hours when students could check in with academic or personal issues. And for peer support, teachers did distance learning and Zoom chats together, sharing resources and technology skills.

Steel City’s third principle was to reprioritize the school’s commitment to engaging parents as stakeholders. Through this principle, Steel City sought to strengthen communication between parents and staff, in particular to understand the struggles and questions they faced in supporting students in their homes. For example, Steel City invited parents to attend squad meetings with their students, enabling parents to better understand what was happening in their student’s day as well as what was expected of the student academically. Some parents even attended class with their students, bringing about an “unintended positive” as Kirley described it, with improved family culture and alignment with Steel City’s approach and school culture.

Finally, Steel City’s fourth principle focused on academic inequity. Leadership immediately recognized that the pandemic exacerbated existing academic inequities. Its commitment was to mitigate, to the extent possible, those negative effects so that gaps wouldn’t widen. A key component of this principle was the decision to continue with new content, albeit at a slower pace, to ensure students at Steel City would continue to make progress compared to their higher-socioeconomic-status peers in Gary. The school created the foundation for this goal by quickly provisioning devices and internet access for all its students, offering classes synchronously but recording them for students who could not attend “live,” and holding teacher office hours for students requiring extra help or clarification on assignments. Steel City’s overarching plan to continue instruction and support families through the previous three principles all dovetail into its desire to prevent inequitable outcomes for its students.

**BEST PRACTICE**

Steel City used a data-informed approach to ensure that students didn't fall through the cracks.

Steel City Academy measured how it was supporting and engaging students and families by tracking progress in four measures (see below) daily and/or weekly, both overall for all students and for student subgroups. The school selected these categories because, in its experience, students who weren't meeting these goals were at a higher risk of falling behind in their education. The targets were based on the percentage of students in each squad. With all the measures tracked by Steel City Academy, the squad is central for both tracking and improving student performance.

MEASURE	TARGET
Daily squad member participation	80% of students in each squad attend squad meetings each morning
Meet weekly goals by exhibiting Steel City core values (purpose, power, team, grit, and joy) and earning Dojo Points/Steel City dollars	70% of students in each squad receive 10 Dojo Points/10 Kickboard dollars
Achieve academic GPA of 2.5	70% of students in each squad have a GPA of 2.5 or higher
Parents have a weekly point of engagement with staff	70% of students in the squad have their parents engage in two-way communication with their squad leader

A special "family love" category was created for students and families who were not able to meet two or more of these goals for two consecutive weeks. Staff members conducted home visits with these families, adhering to appropriate social distancing measures, but working to reestablish a connection point and provide support.

Steel City also measured what it called “human essentials” and achieved 100% on all of these:

- Students with a device
- Students with internet access
- Students using email
- Students receiving access to two meals per day
- Students with access to school supplies

Finally, the importance of a frequently updated academic GPA measure cannot be overstated. It provided a snapshot view of where students stood in real time. Teachers could see where the disconnect points were, then follow up with students on their learning, thus improving their GPAs. Students and parents had real-time access to grades and assignments through their PowerSchool app. A middle school social studies teacher created a competitive “GPA Climber Club,” aimed at inspiring better participation and improved academic performance. This club underlined the importance of participation and GPA while trying to keep it “fun.” It was so successful for that class that Steel City expanded it to include all interested middle and high school students. One teacher noted that she was able to use the students’ GPAs during conversations with parents to emphasize the importance of attending squad and completing work.



BEST PRACTICE

Steel City leveraged its authorizer so that the school could focus attention on providing the best possible virtual experience for students.

Steel City’s authorizer – [the Indiana Charter School Board \(ICSB\)](#) – capitalized on the responsibilities of its role to support Steel City. Executive Director and Principal Katie Kirley said, “They’ve been incredible. They view their role as trying to deeply understand the school context and elicit how they can be helpful. They responded to these circumstances with grace, empathy, and flexibility.”

ICSB worked with the Indiana Charter School Network to convene charter leaders from all authorizers across the state to share best practices and similar challenges. ICSB was also flexible, opening up charter amendments for the 2020-21 school year specifically related to model changes due to COVID-19. For example, Steel City Academy submitted amendments related to offering virtual learning pathways this fall.

ICSB also provided robust administrative support to the school at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kirley noted that as the coronavirus began to escalate, she was inundated with emails and recommendations from a variety of sources such as the state, their city, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other government organizations. The ICSB sifted through the guidance from these various sources to identify the most crucial information and key next steps for charter schools.

Overall, Steel City proactively sought out support from a strong authorizer it could trust for information dissemination, allowing it to focus on student needs.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

The foundation of Steel City’s effectiveness in virtual learning was human connection, which heavily relies on the squad structure to keep students connected with teachers and teachers connected with parents.

Steel City’s commitment to human connection focused on staff, too. Kirley said, “In the same way that we approach kids’ and families’ needs, we have to do that with staff as well. We have to recognize their wellness, trauma, and stress.” Steel City created space, for example, for teachers to have a flexible schedule to meet the demands of their own families.

“*In the same way that we approach kids’ and families’ needs, we have to do that with staff as well. We have to recognize their wellness, trauma, and stress.*”
-Katie Kirley, Principal

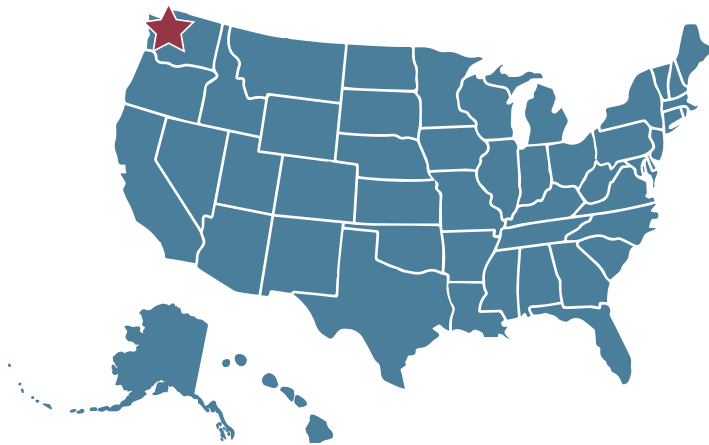
Steel City’s goal of teaching new content daily and setting a high bar for students was a challenge for its community. In surveys, some parents expressed frustration or confusion, noting that they didn’t understand why the school was pushing so hard, particularly given that other schools in the area were not doing so during the pandemic. Kirley noted the need to better articulate the importance of achieving academic excellence despite the challenges, saying they haven’t “done a good enough job of communicating the ‘why’ of their push to continue new learning” during closure. Going forward, addressing decisions about what to teach and how to accommodate unfinished learning will be central to their planning.

Like many schools, the open question for Steel City was similar to its identified challenge: How do you continue on-pace education with the inherent challenges of distance learning? This past spring, with all students participating in distance learning, it continued with new content but slowed the pace. The two options this year – Full Virtual or In Building Success Teams – exacerbate this challenge, as the school is responsible for achieving its high standards for learning across two different “schools.” Deciding how to adjust curriculum and instruction across varied instructional approaches will be particularly difficult, as will measuring student achievement.

Promising Practices
Summit Sierra High School

Location: Seattle, WA

Location Type: Urban



Student Demographics

Asian	7%
Black	32%
Latinx	15%
White	33%
2 or More Races	15%
Economically Disadvantaged	33%
English Learners	8%
Students with Disabilities	20%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Type: Charter
 (part of Summit Public Schools network)

Grades Served: 9-12

Enrollment: 300



School Highlights

Innovating instructional content and approaches

Designing data-intensive approaches

Creating supportive school-student connections

Summit Sierra High School, first opened in 2015 in the Chinatown International District in Seattle, Washington, is part of the Summit Public Schools charter network. Like other schools in the Summit Public Schools network, Summit Sierra delivers a rigorous, personalized, college-preparatory curriculum. Students follow roughly the same coursework trajectory as their grade-level cohort, complemented with personalized learning experiences aligned with their long-term goals. Teachers guide students in mastering content and skills via activities and assignments that both support and challenge each student.

Summit Sierra continued to deliver this academic model even after COVID-19 forced it out of its physical space in mid-March 2020. And its transition to a fully online environment was seamless: The day after Washington Gov. Jay Inslee announced school closures, Summit Sierra offered students an online educational experience similar to its brick-and-mortar experience. In fact, the school intentionally avoids the language “distance learning”; instead, it refers to its post-closure model as *virtual school*. “This isn’t distance learning,” says Principal Ayanna Gore. “It’s much more than that. We literally placed our program in a virtual space.” The school used the Summit Learning Platform (see sidebar) to deliver its instructional model.

Leadership refined the virtual school model over the course of three phases, responding to challenges, changing circumstances, and feedback. Each phase forced teachers and students alike to stretch and grow. Students had to quickly shift to more self-directed learning than they had ever experienced previously, and teachers couldn’t effectively support students if they didn’t substantially change their previous instructional strategies or use relatively unfamiliar features of the Summit Learning Platform. But, particularly given the circumstances, Summit Sierra operated a successful virtual school. Nearly two-thirds of students reported learning more in virtual school than they might have with the traditional school structure.

Sidebar

Summit Learning Platform

The Summit Learning Platform (SLP) is an online tool that contains the materials and systems necessary to guide students’ self-directed learning. Through the SLP, students create personal and academic goals and, with teacher and mentor guidance, define the activities they need to complete to reach those goals. Students use the SLP to access Summit’s curriculum, projects, and content assessments, which they work through at their own pace. Teachers monitor students’ progress in real time through the SLP, using that information to more effectively coach students toward their goals.

Summit Sierra’s plan for fall 2020 is similar to this past spring, fully virtual, a decision they made in early June. The school day runs from 8:20 a.m. to 3:20 p.m. daily, with breaks built in for students to stretch, eat, and work away from their screens. As they learn virtually, students benefit from the intentional culture building and community of Summit Sierra, anchored on a system that provides each student with a mentor supporting a small group of students.

“This isn’t distance learning, it’s much more than that. We literally placed our program in a virtual space.”
 –Ayanna Gore, Principal



BEST PRACTICE

Summit created flexibility for students and families to select the educational experience that best fit their circumstances under the pandemic.

As discussed, Summit Sierra refined its approach to virtual school over three phases. In Phase 1, Summit Sierra’s virtual school closely mirrored the school experience prior to COVID-19, with key adaptations for success in an online environment. For Phases 2 and 3, however, leadership adapted the model to better personalize student learning.

Specifically, the virtual school model in Phases 2 and 3 allowed students to define their educational experience for the remainder of the school year. They did so by leveraging the existing Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) system. Prior to school closures, the PLP system was a way to check in with students and families about their progress over the course of the year. But in spring 2020, Summit redesigned the PLP system to directly respond to the circumstances created by COVID-19.

In this new structure, Summit offered students four different courses of study, called PLP pathways. The four PLP pathways, and the percentage of Summit Sierra students who selected each, were: Accelerate (27%), Stay on Track (46%), Focus on What Matters Most or “Focus” (27%), and Step Back (0%).

Students selected the Accelerate or Stay on Track pathways if their circumstances allowed them to finish out the school year as planned. Under these pathways, students completed the Summit curriculum under the traditional grading policy. The difference between these paths is the timeline: Students with an Accelerate PLP worked through their coursework requirements at their own pace and could end their school year as soon as they were finished, even if that meant much earlier than the traditional end of the year. Stay on Track students followed the planned school year schedule.

The Focus pathway was for students who struggled with completing the Summit curriculum in a virtual environment. This pathway reduced workload and assessments for students and increased their small-group and 1:1 support. If students met the pared-down coursework requirements, they could be

promoted to the next grade, but the highest grade for that semester they could earn was a C. While this grade affected the student's GPA, it did not affect the content or courses that were accessible to them in the following year. Further, students did not need to select the same pathway for all classes; they could select Focus and have pared-down content and a different grading structure for math, but continue with Stay on Track for English. These pathways were distinct from students' existing IEPs.

Students who selected Step Back effectively ended their school year. This pathway was recommended for students who could not engage in school in any meaningful capacity. Students had weekly calls with their mentors, but otherwise focused entirely on their outside-of-school responsibilities and needs. They received Incomplete grades for any classes they had not already met the requirements for and, as a result, students who pursued Step Back were likely to be ineligible to advance to the next grade. No students at Summit Sierra selected Step Back; only eight students across the entire Summit network opted for this pathway.

The pathway students selected had implications for the coursework requirements, schedule, and grading structure for the remainder of their school year. As a result, each of the pathways had consequences for students' academic future.

Students and families selected a PLP pathway based on students' current circumstances, goals, and ability to invest in coursework. In select cases, mentors might suggest an alternative pathway if the student's evidence as a learner — their level of engagement, performance on assignments, and ability to do self-directed learning — in virtual school did not align with the pathway they selected. Generally, students were discouraged from pursuing Step Back because of the implications for grade retention. Ultimately, however, student and family priorities drove this decision-making process, and students were able to switch pathways if the one they initially selected was not the right fit.

In creating these PLP pathways, Summit maintained high expectations for students while also building an environment of support and culture of understanding for students and families, acknowledging the effect that the pandemic might have on students' mental health and responsibilities outside of the classroom. The Pathways structure created a shared language and framework that clearly communicated students' priorities and capacity to engage with school, allowing mentors and teachers to best support students where they were.

**BEST PRACTICE****Summit Sierra took an innovative approach to measuring student attendance and simultaneously supported student learning.**

To measure student engagement in a virtual environment, Summit Sierra again leveraged an existing practice: student goal setting.

Before school closure, students set daily goals for each subject, often informed by the objective for that class for that day. During weekly check-ins, mentors guided students in revising their goals, breaking down goals into manageable chunks and supporting activities, and defining what successful completion of that goal would look like.

This goal-setting structure became a crucial part of virtual school. Only students who made progress on their goals were counted as present. This approach served two purposes: First, it helped identify students who were not engaged in instruction. A central office team monitored goal completion data to measure student attendance and determine if support was necessary. Attendance, as measured by goal setting, in virtual school was ten percentage points higher than physical attendance in brick-and-mortar classrooms (94% vs. 84%).

Second, these goals also provided clear direction and objectives to guide students' self-directed work time. Substantively, the goals in virtual school were similar to goals that a teacher or mentor would have used in a physical space, so students continued to work on high-value content in virtual school.

**BEST PRACTICE****Summit Sierra's mentoring structure created the foundation that allowed virtual school to be successful.**

Underlying all of Summit Sierra's successes with virtual school is its mentoring program; it is the foundation that allowed for a smooth transition to and effective implementation of virtual school.

In Summit Sierra's mentoring program, every teacher is responsible for supporting a group of 20 students. Mentors are assigned their group of students in ninth grade and keep the same group of students through graduation, allowing them to build deep relationships and a sense of community.

The mentoring program existed prior to school closure, but became an even more crucial element in the virtual environment. Students began every virtual school day with a mentor block. During this 70-minute block, students practiced a mindfulness activity with their mentor group, set goals for the day, engaged in self-directed learning, and checked in one-on-one with their mentors.

Mentors served as students' instructional coaches: Teachers reached out to mentors to seek guidance on how to better support the mentee in their subject area; mentors supported students in pursuing and connecting their daily goals to their personalized learning plan; and mentors helped students assess and practice the skills to be successful in self-directed learning, including self-regulation and time management.

“*Mentoring is what made virtual school successful.*”
 -Tenth Grade Mentor, Summit Sierra High School

In many ways, mentors also served as a source of emotional support for students. They became a sounding board and cheerleader as students struggled to adjust to life in a pandemic, and served as the liaison between parents and school, giving parents one point of contact if challenges or questions arose. Mentors communicated student needs to the school's support team and connected them with resources to address food insecurity and manage anxiety.

By leveraging the mentoring structure, Summit Sierra was able to re-ground students and create a sense of normalcy in an academically and emotionally challenging time. According to a tenth-grade mentor from Summit Sierra, “Mentoring is what made virtual school successful.”

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

Summit Sierra's primary success in virtual school is best described in the words of Principal Ayanna Gore: “My babies never stopped learning!” Crucial to the school's success is the fact that Summit Sierra went into virtual learning with a strong instructional program and sound online delivery platform; without that foundation, Summit Sierra might not have thrived as it did.

Summit Sierra leveraged existing tools and practices to support students and families in virtual school. Retooling daily goals to serve as the primary attendance metric is a key example. And teachers leveraged the SLP in new ways to compensate for the lack of physical presence. They created comprehensive plans, for example, to guide students' self-directed learning time and shared them via the SLP; doing so required anticipating students' needs and progress without any visibility in real time. Teachers recorded videos of key skills lessons, took advantage of screen sharing, allowed students to complete content assessments on their own time, broadened assignments to give students more choice in topics and types of deliverables, and incorporated activities to build students' executive function and self-regulation skills. By building on tools it already had in place and tailoring them to this new environment, Summit provided a degree of stability for teachers and students.

At the same time, Summit Sierra grappled with key challenges. In particular, Summit Sierra leadership was concerned about discrepancies in success metrics across racial and ethnic lines. Before schools closed, student data showed achievement gaps, but it's possible that virtual school exacerbated this challenge. White and Asian students, for example, consistently had higher goal-setting rates than Black, Latinx, and multiracial students. Summit Sierra will continue to focus on closing these gaps in both virtual and in-person classrooms.

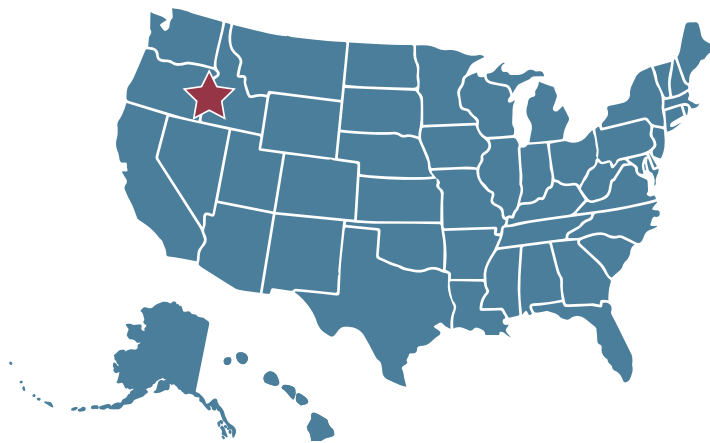
And, like other schools, Summit Sierra is still working to develop an effective approach to serving students with disabilities. In 2019, the Washington State Board of Education recognized Summit Sierra for making some of the largest annual gains for students with disabilities. In the time of COVID-19, however, it's unclear if that growth will continue. Summit Sierra expanded the responsibilities of case managers, conducting frequent 1:1 check-ins with families, and joining online classes to support students with disabilities in specific subjects. But all Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are delivered online, which means that in some cases students do not receive the same services — or as high-quality services — that they did in a physical space. And the majority of students with disabilities selected the Focus pathway, which may have negative implications for those students' progress and academic outcomes, raising concerns about whether IEPs should have been revised to better reflect the circumstances of virtual school.

Promising Practices

Treasure Valley Classical Academy

Location: Fruitland, ID

Location Type: Rural



School Type: Charter (part of Hillsdale College Barney Charter School Initiative charter network)

Grades Served: K-7

Enrollment: 421

Student Demographics

American Indian	4%
Asian	1%
Black	1%
Latinx	13%
Pacific Islander	1%
White	77%
2 or More Races	3%
Economically Disadvantaged	38%
English Learners	4%
Students with Disabilities	14%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Highlights

Serving special student populations

Providing human capital support and adjustments

Building relationships with families and community

In August of 2019, Treasure Valley Classical Academy opened its doors to an initial K-6 cohort of just over 300 students. Principal Steve Lambert shares the philosophy of classical education: “By its nature systematic, organized, and rigorous, a classical curriculum immerses students in the enduring Great Conversation of Western civilization, deliberately cultivates the essential virtues — including courtesy, courage, honesty, self-government, perseverance, and service — and aims to form future citizens who uphold the ideals of the American founding, promote the continuation of our American experiment with self-governance, and who pursue the deepest questions of truth, justice, virtue, and beauty.”

TVCA did not have a one-to-one device-to-student policy prior to closure, but had enough devices and hotspots for each student when closure occurred. TVCA did not cancel any academic scheduling. It went forward with a plan involving a regular schedule with all core academics daily as usual, delivered with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. The very popular “specials” — art, music, Spanish, and physical education — continued weekly via prerecorded sessions.

TVCA called its distance learning plan *distributed learning*, in part because it distributed and collected academic work, including books, through the private bus service it maintains to serve students across a countywide area.

Treasure Valley Classical Academy opened August 31 with an all-school half-day schedule. To facilitate social distancing, half of the students will attend in the mornings, half in the afternoon. Families could request a hybrid option if they wished for their students to stay at home. Should full school closure be required, it will revert to the distributed learning option it used this spring. Students who selected the hybrid option receive daily synchronous support, with supplemental materials, but this option is not full-day. A select group of faculty members and teaching assistants provide daily mentoring and tutoring.



BEST PRACTICE

TVCA's individualized approach to supporting students and families was particularly important for students with disabilities.

Treasure Valley Classical Academy's leadership and student services team realized early on that students with disabilities were particularly at risk of falling behind during distributed learning. Over spring break, TVCA staff reviewed Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and adapted them for distributed learning. When the break was over, they worked with students and families to tailor the IEPs with the full range of services required.

The work of formulating accommodations and modifications was intense and time-consuming. The leadership team chose to pay the student services team members two months of overtime in recognition of the time and effort they dedicated to these students.

Students with disabilities received individualized supports. TVCA teachers found creative ways to adapt to students' needs and meet them where they were, such as providing additional homework packets, recording live sessions so students could return to them later, and setting up private Zoom sessions to hear students read. The following examples illustrate the individual attention and planning provided for special populations:

- Students with behavior goals had a paraprofessional attending general classes with them who could observe them with “speaker view,” and take notes on how engaged they were. These observations informed regularly scheduled 1:1 sessions between the paraprofessional, the student, and sometimes the parent. Paraprofessionals emailed students every morning with guidance so students knew what to expect and do: “This is when your Zoom session is, this is how you log in.”
- A teacher had one student who got overwhelmed at times. In the physical classroom, that student would have a signal that only the teacher knew to indicate the need to take a break. With a virtual classroom, the teacher and student privately determined a specific phrase the student would use to indicate a break was needed. By typing that phrase into chat, the student signaled they would be turning off the camera to get some space.
- The student services team needed to adapt an entire curriculum to one student’s academic needs during the regular school year, so they did the same thing during distributed learning. This meant shifting the timeline of distributing packets and creating completely different, individualized content for that student.
- The TVCA literacy curriculum utilizes Primary Phonics and Stevenson Reading. With the permission of the publisher, they digitized these readers into PDF format. In that format, the reader could easily be shared with students using the Zoom platform shared screen option. Educators highlighted relevant areas of the PDF, for example, and could share and annotate specific examples of text or phonogram patterns. Paraprofessionals sent home physical copies of the readers that they used in online lessons for reinforcement and annotation at home.

Should a return to full virtual learning occur in the future, Treasure Valley is exploring the continuation of one-to-one, in-person service for special education students who do better with face-to-face interaction. Following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for COVID-19 prevention, they propose creating a “clean room” where students and specialists wear masks while receiving and providing direct services. These may also be in place for families without internet bandwidth. Said Principal Lambert, “These are unique situations and our strategy will be developed in consultation with parents and informed by student/IEP needs.”

**BEST PRACTICE****TVCA redesigned staff roles so that teachers could focus on instruction.**

Treasure Valley Classical Academy organized and implemented its distributed learning plan with the goal of setting teachers up to focus on planning and delivering instruction. In a focus group with several TVCA teachers, they said that “The teacher’s job is to teach” became the unofficial motto for TVCA during closure. To support this goal, other staff members filled a variety of roles needed to successfully meet the needs of students.

For example, Director of Operations Chas Baines became the primary person responsible for ensuring students and teachers had access to functioning technology. As noted, previously TVCA did not use technology in its instructional program. Shifting the technology support responsibility away from teachers allowed them to focus on adapting their instruction, which was aided by the technology training Baines designed. Baines also set up Chromebooks, logins, and Google Classroom for over 300 students who had never used computers in class and ensured that every student could get online.

And the TVCA administration proactively created and collected resources to support teachers’ instructional practice. The administration established learning guides with detailed descriptions of everything from an overview of distributed learning, to operations, to academics. They also observed instruction in all classrooms and proactively shared the best practices they saw with other teachers to consider using. One teacher said, “[Principal Lambert] would sit in on our sessions and highlight examples of strong instructional practice — and, more importantly, why that practice was good.” He took screenshots in Google Classroom to illustrate these practices, and shared those examples with all of TVCA’s teachers.

**BEST PRACTICE****TVCA leveraged close relationships and family support to keep its school community close during closure.**

Treasure Valley Classical Academy prioritized human contact with students and families. During the first week of closure, teachers contacted every family to check on their well-being and their needs, and to solicit questions they had about the distributed learning plan. They were flexible on the timing of these calls to respect family schedules and work requirements.

Teachers and staff worked as a team to create contact points so that families felt supported. Teachers arranged for students to have face time with them online. Homeroom teachers had a daily “live” schedule with students, where they also took attendance, answered questions, and made themselves available to family members at home with the students.

During closure, TVCA bus drivers served as an additional communication portal between families and schools. They played a key role in distributing food and materials, often “to the door” of their families. If a student or parent on the route had a specific request or need, they could tell the bus driver. For example, a parent would say, “My student finished this work I am sending back with you, but we need to work on this particular area, and we know that isn’t in the standard weekly packet.” The bus driver communicated that need back to front office staff and teachers, who then addressed it.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

As a rural school, Treasure Valley Classical Academy needs to be relatively self-supporting. To that end, the school successfully leveraged existing features it had previously established. For example, while many schools contract with outside companies to supply student meals and provide busing, TVCA delivered these services in-house. The school leveraged those services to support students and families during closure. Redeploying its fleet of buses is a key example. But TVCA also operates its own commercial kitchen. The school received special permission from the Idaho State Department of Education Child Nutrition Program to serve lunches free of charge to any child between the ages of 1 and 18. Any TVCA student and their siblings qualified for free lunches. With its own commercial kitchen, TVCA prepared these meals and made them available for pickup or delivery via its self-operated buses.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for Treasure Valley Classical Academy was translating a highly interactive, in-person learning model into its distributed learning model. Traditional TVCA classroom instruction involves text-centered, teacher-led instruction that fosters pre-Socratic inquiry and discussion. They also focus on memory work, recitation, and public speaking, which is cultivated through practice. Even with the relatively small class sizes favored by TVCA, all of these were difficult to re-create via distributed learning.

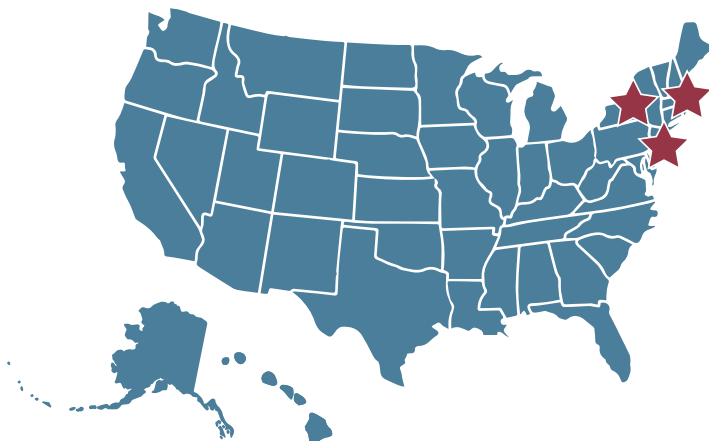
One teacher described his instructional practice, prior to closure, as “constant discussion and back and forth between me and my students, [which is] really hard to do in the virtual environment.” Teachers tried a variety of techniques to keep students engaged online, such as keeping the response medium a mystery until the last minute. Students didn’t know if they would be directly called upon, asked to write in the chat box, or given a written prompt to answer. Other teachers sent private messages to individual students about what would be expected the next day in a certain class, or asked parents to share personal experiences during class about things like immigration or citizenship. Teachers of younger students would use simple games or flash cards to interact.

The biggest open question relates to this challenge: For all or some of their students who continue at home in the fall, how will teachers provide instruction that follows the classical model? Since this was their first year, many of the older students did not begin their education with the classical method. For example, one teacher shared that they teach students to read through handwriting, and this is done with a focus on body posture and fitting their furniture to them. The students are taught to keep their bodies relaxed and adjusted, with their pencils held in a certain way. This body alignment helps them follow along with minimal distractions. Students at home don't have the same desks, or the benefit of a teacher in the room to correct this alignment.

Promising Practices
Uncommon Schools

Location: Cities in MA, NJ, and NY

Location Type: Urban



School Type: Charter network

Grades Served: K-12

Enrollment: 20,000

Student Demographics

Asian	1%
Black	85%
Latinx	9%
White	2%
2 or More Races	4%
Economically Disadvantaged	84%
English Learners	3%
Students with Disabilities	12%

Data are rounded and may not sum to 100 percent



School Highlights

Innovating instructional content and approaches

Big-picture planning and establishing core principles

Uncommon Schools started in 1997 with a single school in Newark, New Jersey. Since then, the network has grown to 55 schools serving 20,000 students across Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey. Since the first class graduated in 2004, 99% of Uncommon Schools students have been accepted to a four-year college.

As COVID-related closures hit, Uncommon strategically allocated its resources to continue providing rigorous instruction. Because of supply issues, the network was unable to immediately provide all students with devices and allowed students with a device at home to use that one. Available devices were given to students without devices at home, prioritizing high school students and students with disabilities; the remaining K-8 students received devices a few weeks later. This year, all students received Chromebooks, regardless of what they had at home.

Uncommon's distance learning plan had largely asynchronous learning for students in grades K-8 and more synchronous learning opportunities for the high school students. This approach in part reflected that older students are more independent and could more easily get online and participate in classroom experiences, while elementary students would likely need more support from parents and, as such, more flexibility in their schedule.

Uncommon Schools created an online "Summer Work" program for all students, following the structure of learning used in the spring. This was to help reinforce essential standards, practice skills, and minimize summer loss.

To build and maintain relationships with students and families, Uncommon asked teachers to maintain daily office hours every day except Friday, to answer student questions, provide feedback on work, and ensure student understanding of content. Teachers checked in weekly with parents of students in fourth grade and younger, and for older students, weekly one-to-one check-ins. These were designed as a touchpoint on health and well-being, as well as to provide academic and technology support where needed. Students and families who were hard to reach or had pressing needs were referred to a school leader to troubleshoot problems and reset expectations.

All Uncommon Schools began the year fully remote on August 31 and were to remain remote through at least Oct. 2, with students learning from home each day. Decisions about opening for in-person learning will depend on conditions in the area.

**BEST PRACTICE****Uncommon Schools leveraged its best teachers to quickly produce high-quality instructional content for elementary students within the network and beyond.**

Uncommon Schools largely relied on a coordinated, asynchronous instruction plan for K-8 online learning. The primary vehicle for asynchronous learning was 20-minute, prerecorded instructional videos. To maximize the efficiency of this approach, one grade-level teacher per subject recorded each lesson and shared that lesson throughout the network. Uncommon released the first set of instructional videos the week of March 30.

To maximize the effectiveness of this approach, the network's curriculum and assessment team selected specific teachers from across the network to record each video. They chose the teachers who were most effective in that lesson's content and who represented a range of geographic, racial, and ethnic diversity. These teachers were selected based on assessment data, previous classroom observations, and instructional leadership.

To support this work and achieve consistency in quality across the subject areas, Uncommon Schools provided training to teachers on instructional practices they should use when making these short videos. Teachers began their videos focused on practices they use in the classroom and were asked to "up the enthusiasm [level] to 200 percent." Teachers had coaches available to support them with specific techniques during these video recording sessions. For each lesson, the teacher would initially record the video, receive feedback from their coach, and then record it again, if necessary.

These videos were received enthusiastically both inside and outside the Uncommon network. The feedback from families was positive, and teachers appreciated the consistent high-quality instructional material for each subject they taught. Uncommon made the decision to provide open-source access to its "on-air talent" — providing free public access via its website, thus sharing it with a large number of other district and charter schools in search of instructional videos. One of the network leaders noted this "was the right thing to do to share it publicly with others as soon as we shared with our families."

**BEST PRACTICE**

Uncommon Schools quickly created a multi-department COVID Response Team to lead the network's decision-making.

In February 2020, before any state had made the decision to close schools but with the possibility looming, Uncommon created a cross-department team of people to make decisions related to COVID-19 and lead operations related to this crisis for the entire network. The COVID Response Team met daily to determine how the network would respond to and provide guidance to schools in rapidly changing circumstances. They proactively identified the sequence of next steps and considerations if schools needed to shut down. At the same time, they mapped out current challenges and developed a plan for how to address the issue, the anticipated timeline for doing so, and how to communicate that plan to schools.

The COVID Response Team, for example, helped design the network's approach to serving students with disabilities if the schools were closed. Because Uncommon operates schools in three different states, the network received frequent and ever-changing guidance, recommendations, and rules from those states about providing student services. The COVID Response Team served as a clearinghouse, sifting through state information and pulling out the must-know and must-act-on pieces, then strategically communicated that information to schools, saving individual school leaders from having to track updates on their own. The COVID Response Team shared special education updates every Thursday, and school leaders could rely on that without digging through mountains of communications.

Once it became clear that students were not returning to in-person classrooms, the COVID Response Team evolved into the Comeback Team, expanding to include senior leaders from key instruction areas, human resources, external affairs, finance, and special projects. This team met twice a week to manage elements that the network had to address in order to reopen in the fall. This team was led by the chief of staff to the president and the chief of staff to the chief of operations. It was divided into smaller, topic-specific sub-teams: health and safety, curriculum, policy and regulations, communications, professional development, cleaning and logistics, etc. Just as the COVID Response Team streamlined communications and operational decisions during the spring, the Comeback Team led reopening efforts this fall.

**BEST PRACTICE**

Uncommon piloted virtual project-based learning to engage high school students, with plans to expand opportunities next year.

In the brick-and-mortar setting, Uncommon requires high school students to complete project-based learning opportunities called project intensives. Traditionally, these project intensives are designed and offered by faculty at each individual school; during distance learning, Uncommon centralized the offerings and made them voluntary.

The network created and offered 10 project intensives on topics like photography and digital music production. The goal was to bring joy and create a sense of community as students connected with each other and adults around a new topic – even if they didn’t do so at the same time or in the same place. Through the online intensives, students produced an academic project that they felt passionate about and willingly worked on beyond school hours. Some project intensives focused on general interest areas while others were more aligned to current events, such as a photography intensive created by a photojournalist who covered the protests following the death of George Floyd. Other topics included consulting, jazz history, and understanding COVID-19. While these projects were not for credit, students participated in order to build content knowledge while building community.

Uncommon found that this strategy was particularly effective for engaging high school students. Even though the project intensives were voluntary, engagement was high and students showed up daily. As they moved into the 2020-21 school year, Uncommon learned from this success. It is once again requiring students to participate in project intensives and leveraging the enthusiasm and engagement in this activity to draw students in more intensely to other learning opportunities. Uncommon leadership is taking advantage of remote learning to seek outside facilitators who otherwise wouldn’t be able to physically run projects because of proximity or scheduling. These facilitators bring expert content knowledge on a subject. Uncommon trains the facilitators on best practices for student engagement and provides an Uncommon staff member to oversee the Zoom session.

Moving Forward: Strengths, Challenges, Open Questions

Uncommon Schools strove to adapt its approach to serving students with disabilities based on early lessons in distance learning. Students with disabilities in Uncommon high schools received direct instruction from the first day of distance learning. But as noted, students with disabilities in elementary schools started distance learning by working through paper packets (with the goal of ultimately reaching one-to-one student-to-device ratios).

It became clear that one-on-one and small-group, direct instruction via online learning was the best way to work with students with disabilities under the current circumstances. “A key lesson for us was that small-group, live instruction is so important. Absent that, it’s difficult to know what kids are understanding, how much they’re paying attention, or what they’re taking away.” Uncommon learned from this lesson and prioritized distributing devices to elementary students with disabilities in the first weeks of closure, so that those students could receive instruction.

“*A key lesson for us was that small-group, live instruction is so important. Absent that, it’s difficult to know what kids are understanding, how much they’re paying attention, or what they’re taking away.*”

–Samantha Messer, Senior Director,
Special Education & ELL

Additionally, Uncommon ensured all services moved online for students and modified all the work for students in accordance with their IEPs. Other accommodations included dropping off hard copies of books for students who might struggle with reading on a screen. Younger special education students and English learners received STEM-related, project-based learning kits to supplement their summer work.

It is important to note, however, that serving students with disabilities was also Uncommon's primary challenge. While virtual one-on-one and small-group direct instruction was as effective an approach as distance learning allowed, it was not ideal.

Uncommon's leadership is concerned that the gulf between special education and general education students will widen during this time because the online medium is not as conducive for special

education students. To that end, an open question Uncommon is attempting to answer is if and how they can bring special education students — particularly those in lower grades, who are likely to regress at a pace faster than their general education peers — back into the classroom for in-person instruction.

“There is no substitute for in-person learning for students with disabilities.”

—Samantha Messer, Senior Director,
Special Education & ELL

Another outstanding question for Uncommon is how to assess student learning and progress in the upcoming school year. Without the ability to track student growth, it's difficult to identify the breakdown in students' understanding and the root cause of their error. In 2020, students were assessed based on the assignments they delivered each week: For K-4 students this was one deliverable for math and one in reading; for students in grades 5-8 they submitted two assignments per subject area (math, ELA, history, and science). This year, K-8 students are required to submit a deliverable per day per content area so that teachers are gathering data on a daily basis along with the synchronous learning that is taking place.

Uncommon paired online content with network-created content this year, delivered through online platforms. These include Zearn, Amplify CKLA, and Epic. It is also using Actively Learn as a platform. These curricula can be used in school and at home, so that students can move seamlessly from remote to in-person learning environments. And the curricula allow for close monitoring of student progress, including skill and content mastery and the amount of time a student spends on a topic. With the built-in assessments provided by these programs, Uncommon should be able to more closely monitor learning and growth.

Appendices



Appendix A

Schools were selected for this project based on their performance prior to the closures related to COVID-19; authors' review of the Center on Reinventing Public Education's database of school approaches to distance learning; recommendations from a range of school-, district-, and CMO-based educators; and interviews with leaders in nominated or identified schools. The process for identifying and selecting case study candidates focused on the goal of identifying schools executing strong distance learning practices, particularly in underserved communities. Of the potential candidates, the schools profiled in this work were carefully selected to reflect a diversity of geographies, student populations, school sizes, and school types. The scope of this project only allowed for 12 case studies. There were many schools with promising practices that could not be included here.

Information on schools' promising distance-learning practices comes from a variety of sources: the authors' review of publicly available information, including schools' published distance learning plans; interviews with school leaders and administrators; and focus groups with teachers and other instructional staff.

All of the information about schools' practices and strategies highlighted in these case studies is true at the time of publication. However, circumstances, and the decisions school leaders make in response to those circumstances, are constantly changing, and this information may be outdated at this point in time.

Finally, note that the case studies don't highlight every promising practice for every school. Several strategies (e.g., working to provide devices and internet access) were consistent across schools. Instead, the authors selected three promising practices for each school that were compelling and that, when the case studies are considered together as a body of work, show a range and diversity of practices.

Appendix B

Resource List

Click on each resource to learn more.

SCHOOL	RESOURCE	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Breakthrough Public Schools	Wizerme Platform	Teacher assignment creation and tracking program
	Distance Learning Schedule	Sample schedule used by one network school
	Schoology	Learning management system (LMS)
	Breakthrough Start 2020	Fall 2020 opening options
Gentry Public Schools	Multi-Classroom Leadership	Leadership system for Opportunity Culture schools
	Opportunity Culture	Evidence-based intervention program for school improvement
	Pioneer Virtual Learning Academy	Description of virtual option
	Ready for Learning Plan	Instructional plan for distance learning
	Arkansas Playbook: Addressing Unfinished Learning	Fall 2020 state guide for opening schools
Hamilton Grange School	Collaborative & Proactive Solutions Model	Restorative justice model
	Sample Daily Schedule	Spring 2020 daily schedule
	Distance Learning Idea Exchange	Idea sharing spreadsheet used by teachers to improve instruction
Impact Public Schools	Impact at Home	Distance learning landing page
	Circle	Structured mindfulness program
Kairos Academies	Kairos Oikoi	Early iteration of virtual learning plan (Note: changes were made not reflected herein)
	Kairos Academies: Year 1	PowerPoint deck overview of Kairos model
	Fall Options for Families	Fall 2020 opening options
	PhEt Simulations	Simulation software

Resource List, continued

Click on each resource to learn more.

SCHOOL	RESOURCE	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
KIPP Columbus High	Family Enrollment Choices 2020-2021	Fall 2020 opening options
	Advisory Key Points	Rationale and expectations for advisory groups
	Learning Acceleration Guide	Guide from TNTP used by KIPP to accelerate learning
	Remote Learning Dashboard	Spring 2020 daily planner for students
Nampa School District #131	Reopening Plan	Fall 2020 plan
	Kindergarten Journeys Planning	Pacing plan for kindergarten
	Parent/Guardian – Key Competencies	Key competencies and supportive resources for parents and guardians
	Tight & Loose Document	Guiding document across district schools
Rocketship Public Schools	Weekly Individual Goals for Students	Online Learning Program (OLP) goals and video explanation
	Sample Daily Schedule	Sample daily online schedule for teachers
	Live “ABC” Yoga	Sample enrichment activity
	Daily Schedule	Sample daily online schedule for students
	Distance Learning Launchpad	Full-service landing page for RS distance learning
Steel City Academy	Steel City Academy Opening Plan	Fall 2020 opening plan
Summit Sierra High School	Virtual High School Schedule	Fall 2020 schedule for virtual learning
	Virtual School Orientation	March 2020 PowerPoint student orientation
	Mindfulness Strategies	Summit Learning PD on mindfulness
Treasure Valley Classical Academy	Classical Education	Description of model used by TVCA
Uncommon Schools	Uncommon Learning Model Plans and Schedules, Fall 2020	Fall 2020 opening plan and sample schedules
	Project Intensives Course Offerings	Descriptions of course offerings available to students

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Any errors are the authors' alone.

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.



About Teach For America

Teach For America works in partnership with urban and rural communities in more than 50 regions across the country to expand educational opportunities for children. Founded in 1990, Teach For America recruits and develops a diverse corps of outstanding leaders to make an initial two-year commitment to teach in high-need schools and become lifelong leaders in the effort to end educational inequity. Today Teach For America is a force of over 60,000 alumni and corps members committed to profound systemic change.

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