



Supporting California Students in a Time of Crisis

Barriers to Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Strategies to Address Them

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IN THIS BRIEF

- ▶ An overview of barriers students and their families face to distance and hybrid learning;
- ▶ Information about the ways certain barriers have a disproportionate impact on some student groups, and why this is an equity issue;
- ▶ Emerging strategies to address these barriers;
- ▶ Information about state and federal funding to address many of the barriers identified in this brief;
- ▶ Ideas for actions school boards can take; and
- ▶ Resources for governance team members.

All school shutdowns, such as those from past natural disasters, have major impacts on students and their families. As a result, many California educators entered the pandemic with some strategies to support learning in a time of crisis. In turn, several of the unique lessons learned through the COVID-19 pandemic will likely be applicable to future emergencies that arise across the state or nation.

Like other educational disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic has a disproportionate impact on historically underserved groups of students and their families.² The isolation caused by the pandemic also presents barriers, such as distance from services and poor technological infrastructure, that particularly affect students in rural communities. Board members and county education leaders can better establish equitable policies that support all students in their districts if they understand the major barriers to learning in a distance education environment and how some students are more likely to be impacted by those barriers. This brief addresses these challenges and offers several strategies for governance teams to support equitable instruction during distance learning. Additionally, a list of resources is provided on page 6 to support board members in addressing these issues.

Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most California schools started the 2020–21 school year using a distance learning approach.¹ And even as many schools and districts return to the classroom for in-person instruction, the barriers to and strategies for remote learning continue to be relevant. For example:

- ▶ Many reopened schools are using hybrid instructional models, where students learn both at home and at school, making distance learning an instructional strategy for a portion of the week;
- ▶ Many districts are bringing elementary students into classrooms for in-person learning, but continuing distance learning for many secondary students; and
- ▶ Some families will opt to keep their students at home for the duration of the school year, and Assembly Bill (AB) 86 requires local educational agencies (LEAs) to accommodate those families' needs.

Major Barriers to Student Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted student learning in a variety of ways. The following section includes a brief overview of common barriers and how they may impact students and their families.

Technological Barriers

May 2020 data showed that roughly one in five California students lacked access to a computer and/or to reliable internet for distance learning.³ Students in rural areas are particularly likely to struggle with access to technology or a strong internet connection. In 2021, broadband coverage is as low as five percent in some rural California counties.⁴ While many students in urban areas have the necessary supplies and access to participate in online learning, significant disparities remain.⁵

In some cases, additional barriers include teachers, parents, and other caregivers who are not comfortable with technology, which

can widen gaps in access. A 2018 survey of over 400,000 teachers found that 78 percent of respondents were uncomfortable facilitating student collaboration using digital tools, and 76 percent reported struggling to personalize learning for individual students.⁶ Families, too, are being asked to support their children in using technology tools that are often unfamiliar. In a 2020 survey, parents said they were struggling to support their children with online learning.⁷

Communication Barriers

Students are accustomed to spending a significant amount of time with their teachers, but connection and communication are minimized during distance learning. Close relationships with teachers and other trusted adults are an important component of student success, and children may need to find new ways to connect with trusted adults.⁸ When students are physically separated from their teachers (whether by remote learning or due to the mitigation strategies necessary to keep students safe), engagement and focus may be more challenging for all students.

Low-quality communication may be just as weighty of a challenge as a lack of communication. Some teachers have reported that families receive mixed messages from different teachers within a school, school leadership, and/or district leadership. In these cases, students and their caregivers may be unsure of policies and expectations. This has significant implications for members of governance teams and educators as they support the transition to intermittent or full-time in-person instruction.

Barriers Related to Learning at Home

Student mental health has emerged as a serious concern during the pandemic. Both AB 86 and the federal American Rescue Plan, passed in March 2021 (see page 4), provide funding for additional supports for health, counseling, and mental health services. Many students receive mental health support in school and may no longer have access to this support at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic presents a host of health, economic, and emotional stressors that may affect children.⁹ Distance and hybrid learning also mean that teachers have less interaction with students, which decreases their ability to recognize warning signs of stress or mental health challenges.

Many teachers report that their students have been unable to participate fully in distance learning because they are responsible for younger siblings. Students may need to watch their siblings if their parents are at work, if someone in the family becomes ill, or for a variety of other reasons.¹⁰ These students may not be able to focus on schoolwork or have adequate time to do so. The same can be true of students who need to work outside the home to help their families.

Disproportionate Impacts on Underserved Student Groups

While these barriers affect many students across the state, they have a disproportionate impact on specific student groups that experience additional challenges. Board members are well-positioned to address these specific concerns.

English Learners

Distance learning presents additional challenges for English learners. To thrive at school, English learners need opportunities to engage meaningfully with peers,¹¹ and that may be harder to facilitate during distance learning. English learners' families also benefit when school and district communication is provided in their home languages, which may not be universally available. This may mean less access to information on school/district expectations, as well as the resources available to help families. Additionally, a report from Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) notes that English learners' families are disproportionately vulnerable to COVID-19 because of issues such as healthcare disparities and participation in essential jobs.¹²

Foster and Homeless Youth

Foster youth and students experiencing homelessness need additional support to access a high-quality education during distance learning, and they may be separated from critical resources during school shutdowns. These students may lack safe, private, and comfortable places to access distance learning. In addition, distance learning has made it increasingly difficult for school districts to identify students who are experiencing homelessness, and therefore has made it challenging to provide those students with the services they need. To address this issue, the Contra Costa County Office of Education has relied on teachers as the main source of identification, using handouts and an informative webpage to help train teachers to remotely detect signs of homelessness.

In the absence of regular opportunities to access food through schools, there has been an increase in the number of students facing food insecurity.¹³ Some students also lack the support of courts and social workers, who may play key roles in their lives, and whose administrative services may be limited during the pandemic.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities are a group of particular concern for educators and school leaders. Some student services, such as certain educational supports or counseling, may be interrupted during school shutdowns. These services are necessary for student success and may legally be required by student individualized education programs (IEPs). Teachers may also find it challenging to tailor digital instruction to students' unique needs.

In recognition of the need for schools to address these educational barriers, Governor Gavin Newsom previously issued guidance that allows LEAs to offer in-person instruction for small cohorts of

students, even if the schools are primarily offering distance learning. AB 86 requires any districts that are unable to reopen due to public health guidance to provide learning hubs for cohorts of students prioritized within the bill (see page 4).¹⁴ Boards may wish to consider this option after identifying the barriers most relevant to their local community. Additional strategies for addressing the disproportionate impact on vulnerable student groups are provided in the following section.

Strategies to Address Barriers

As the pandemic has persisted, educators and administrators in California have identified strategies to address problems that interfere with students' ability to learn at a distance. Additionally, new funding from AB 86 and the American Rescue Plan Act is intended to help schools address many of these barriers.

Technology Access and Usage

School districts have been using a variety of strategies to deliver technology to students who have difficulties accessing distance learning. The federal E-Rate program is a resource to help districts finance technology needs, with discounts ranging from 20-90 percent of technology and connectivity costs, based on district poverty rates.¹⁵ Many districts have distributed hotspots to students who do not have home access to broadband internet. Some districts have created hotspot hubs, either in fixed locations or using buses. For instance, to expand broadband access to students experiencing homelessness, the Alameda County Office of Education has designated buses as hotspots in parking lots near where families live. It also distributes chargers to students who are living in cars.¹⁶

Some districts have tackled technology challenges with external partnerships. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Los Angeles Unified School District partnered with Verizon to increase internet access for students. After a few months, the agreement was expanded to offer internet access to more low-income students throughout the state.¹⁷ In the short term, this type of partnership may be an effective way to support distance learning for some districts. But even with emergent partnerships, unequal internet access and inconsistent hotspot strength continue to plague California students and families. To address this, some districts are sharing lists of recommended internet providers that are offering low-cost services and educational support organizations are curating lists of resources to streamline technology use for teachers and students.^{18,19,20,21} In doing so, many of these organizations are screening resources to see if they are aligned to educational standards or have research indicating their effectiveness.

Some districts have integrated educational strategies that rely less heavily on technology. In one teacher focus group, a science teacher from a small urban school district in southern California reported that her district assembled "brown bag" science kits. The kits contained materials for basic science experiments and were inexpensive to assemble. To facilitate a greater number of students to participate in

hands-on science in a distance environment, the district distributed these kits during school meal distribution.²²

Support for Student Groups

Some student groups, such as students with disabilities and English learners, have instructional needs that teachers may struggle to support through distance learning. Many county offices of education and districts have been operating learning hubs, where they offer small groups of students in-person academic and social-emotional support. AB 86 provides funding for community learning hubs that provide increased access to technology, high-speed internet, and other academic supports. The bill further requires that hubs be made available in districts that have not yet transitioned back to in-person learning; in these districts, hubs must at minimum be available for students with IEPs and as many students in prioritized groups as is possible.

When created with equity in mind, learning hubs can be of great benefit to students who may face some of the technological, logistical, or social-emotional barriers addressed in this brief.²³ AB 86 also provides LEAs \$1000 for every student in a school district who experiences homelessness, based on districts' fall 2020 McKinney-Vento count in CALPADS. Learning hubs may predominantly serve students experiencing homelessness, and board members can work with district leaders to ensure hubs are enacted equitably using AB 86 funds to effectively support students experiencing homelessness.

Expanded learning time offers additional opportunities to learn and engage with peers, which can be particularly beneficial to students who face barriers to learning at a distance.²⁴ California supports nearly one million students through expanded learning time programs. Program leaders have offered guidance for ways that LEAs and programs can form smooth partnerships (see Resources section). Throughout the state, LEAs are also working with volunteer tutors to provide students with additional, personalized instruction.²⁵ Tutoring is one of the most effective ways to increase student learning,²⁶ and with district support, can be accessible to students who would benefit most. Governing board members can also reference existing plans that pay particular attention to students with disabilities, such as the San Mateo County Office of Education's work to increase in-person instructional time for students with disabilities.²⁷

A report from PACE suggests that districts use targeted Local Control Funding Formula funds to address gaps in students' understanding as a result of distance learning.²⁸ In addition to budgetary advocacy, schools across the state are using strategies that facilitate best practices in educating English learners and students with disabilities, such as increasing student opportunities to work in small groups, hear English spoken aloud more frequently, and engage with hands-on materials.²⁹

STATE AND FEDERAL FUNDING FOR DISTRICTS TO ADDRESS BARRIERS AND LEARNING RECOVERY

Assembly Bill 86, signed in March 2021, provides \$4.6 billion toward learning recovery, through such structures as small group learning supports, the expansion of summer school programs, and enhanced mental health services for students. Up to 15 percent of a district's apportionment, based on LCFF, can also be used to improve services for students participating in distance learning or support activities to prepare districts for in-person instruction. Districts must publish their plan for addressing learning recovery by June 1, 2021. The bill prioritizes several student groups, many discussed within this brief:

- ▶ Students eligible for reduced-price meals
- ▶ Students with disabilities
- ▶ Disengaged students
- ▶ Foster youth
- ▶ Homeless youth
- ▶ English learners
- ▶ Students unable to access online instruction
- ▶ Students at risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation
- ▶ Disengaged students
- ▶ Students below grade level (including, but not limited to, those who did not enroll in Kindergarten for the 2020–21 year, credit-deficient pupils, students who are at risk of not graduating on time, and others identified by certificated staff)

Supplementing the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds provided under the CARES Act and the CRRSA Act from March and December 2020 respectively, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) signed by President Biden in March 2021 provides \$15.3 billion to California's K-12 schools based on their share of Title I funding. At least 20 percent of a districts' ARP ESSER allotments must be spent on learning recovery, and they will have until September 30, 2023 to obligate the money. Districts must make a plan for a safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services publicly available on their websites within 30 days of receiving the ARP ESSER funds. Districts must also seek public comment on their plans before making them publicly available. The ARP also provides \$7.1 billion in additional funding to support internet connectivity that will be available through the Federal Communication Commission. Additional funding from the federal E-Rate program is intended to support internet connectivity for students.

Social-emotional Supports

Some educators report successfully addressing students' social and emotional needs in distance learning by replicating familiar classroom structures, such as morning meetings and advisory periods. Many sources encourage educators to hold regular check-ins with students and emphasize one-on-one connections. Teachers may want to consider checking in with students in ways that follow the guidelines recommended in a recent brief from PACE. The brief includes links to evidence-based screeners and surveys, as well as issues to consider when assessing students' mental health.³⁰ Teachers have also noted the importance of talking about emotions in the classroom, and some suggest communicating by phone or even mail.³¹

Districts can also provide mental health services to support students, such as in Sacramento County, where the County Office of Education partnered with the County Public Health Department to offer emergency in-person counseling for students with acute needs.³² Telemedicine presents an opportunity to provide services to a broader group of students, and remote options can allow students in rural areas to have access to mental and physical health supports.³³ Some districts work with mental health professionals to provide school staff with the resources, including protocols, to reach out to students and have compassionate conversations.

Many students are facing emotional challenges that teachers may not be able to address. However, teachers and other school-based staff who interact with students can connect them to resources. A list of mental health crisis resources, developed by the California Department of Education, is included in the Resources section of this brief. Regardless of the LEA's specific support structures, it should ensure that educators and administrators at each site know what resources are available and how to help connect students and families with the appropriate services.

Communication and Expectations

School districts and county offices of education can help students and families access distance and hybrid learning by communicating clearly and accessibly. In a July 2020 teacher focus group, participants shared some of the strategies for effective communication that are being employed throughout the state. One teacher in a rural district in southern California reported that district administrators communicated consistent learning expectations by sending streamlined, district-level information to all families. As a result, each school in the district was aligned, and families knew what to expect, even if their students attended different schools. A teacher in a suburban district in central California reported that teachers were consistently involved in planning for distance learning. This meant that teacher voice was well represented in district plans, and they were able to bring their first-hand knowledge of student needs to the planning conversations.

Focus group participants also reported that parents were appreciative when all the teachers in a school used a single platform, such as Google Classroom. This means that students and their families are only required to master one tool, after which they can find all their assignments in one place and focus on learning.³⁴

As more districts implement increased in-person instruction, clear communication is necessary to facilitate transitions for students and their families. Some districts have set up hotlines in multiple languages for families to contact to receive information about distance learning as well as returning to in-person instruction. For those that remain in distance learning as their peers return, additional effort should be made to ensure they remain included in communication strategies.

What Can Boards Do?

Board members have a few key levers to help students succeed in distance learning.

Actions to Address Technological Barriers

Board members can leverage successful technology strategies from elsewhere in the state. Rural districts may look to Earlimart School District in Tulare County, one of several small, rural districts using state and CARES Act funding to install 4G LTE antennae to provide WiFi in their communities, since infrastructure challenges compound the barriers to distance learning. Other districts may consider partnerships like the aforementioned Verizon–LAUSD alliance. As board members identify other districts' strategies that might work locally, they may consider reaching out to those districts to learn more about what they did and how they did it.

Actions to Address Communication Barriers

Board members can also help districts connect with families and other caregivers by encouraging strong and streamlined district-level communication. Districts are well-positioned to share resources; communicate clearly about policies on issues like attendance, grading, and technology; issue invitations to board meetings; and offer updates on school reopening plans. As schools reopen with hybrid models, it is critical to make sure that all families, including those with less access to technology, have a strong understanding of school structures and expectations, and have an easy way to communicate any challenges they face and to request the support they need from the school/district.

Actions to Provide Targeted Support to Student Groups

Board members can consult available district data to understand different student needs. Knowing which students need access to devices, which students are not consistently participating in distance learning, and which students experienced an interruption in services can help board members partner closely with districts in delivering targeted resources and supports.

Board members should consider leveraging their networks and hosting virtual convenings to hold important conversations and

take action to remove barriers to student learning. Students and their families are facing many simultaneous crises, and school board members can consider ways to allocate resources or approach partnerships that will help students thrive. Board members should consider the non-instructional issues that impede student learning, such as food insecurity and health concerns, when designing their plans. Other considerations include adding discussion of important barriers or promising solutions to board meeting agendas, asking experts to speak at meetings, holding board study sessions, or connecting district/county leaders with experts. And as boards identify promising strategies, they may consider working closely with district leaders to implement or pilot those strategies locally.

MONITORING THE LCAP TO EMPHASIZE EQUITY

As board members review and revise their districts' 2021–22 Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans, there are several opportunities to address equity. Board members should use LCAP development and monitoring to reflect on high-leverage supports for students who are learning during a pandemic.

Board members are particularly encouraged to review student data to understand the most significant challenges that arose in the 2020–21 school year and to focus district attention on LCAP requirements that are designed to advance equity. Of particular importance in the current distance learning environment, and given the disparities it exacerbates, districts can devote extra attention and resources to:

- ▶ Specific distance learning supports for English learners, students with disabilities, students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness;
- ▶ Achievable, efficient plans to ensure that all students have access to technology, including stable internet access;
- ▶ A clear plan to assess and combat the impacts of lost instructional time and other disruptions due to the pandemic;
- ▶ Resources to monitor and address student mental health; and
- ▶ Strong family engagement strategies for students who are not participating in distance learning, conducted in families' home languages.

Questions for Board Members to Consider

As board members partner with other education leaders to address barriers to learning, the following questions may be useful.

- 1) What do we know about the barriers that have the greatest impact on student learning in our district?
 - a) What are they? Who is affected?
 - b) How can we prioritize and address those barriers?
 - c) What else do we need to know, and how can we learn it?
 - d) Which organizations in the community can partner with schools to help support students?
- 2) What are some promising practices happening in the district? How can we amplify them?
 - a) Which resources are available through our COE?
 - b) Which partners do we have? Which partners would be useful?
 - c) Which ideas do we have? Can we pilot them?
- 3) How are we engaging with families?
 - a) Have we asked about the best ways to contact families, listen to them, and communicate information?
 - b) Do families receive streamlined and consistent messaging *in their home languages*? If not, how can we make things clear for them?
 - c) Does the district have liaisons or staff to support foster youth and students experiencing homelessness? If so, do we receive regular reports for them? If not, who is in contact with students in foster care and experiencing homelessness?
- 4) Which supports have teachers asked for? Do we know what teachers have identified as necessary for facilitating distance/hybrid learning?
- 5) What does the data tell us about which students are accessing distance/hybrid learning? Where are there disparities or gaps?
 - a) How can we support students who have not engaged with distance learning?
 - b) Are there resources the district can provide students that are less reliant on technology, such as ideas for how to engage in science at home or to participate in art projects with simple materials?
- 6) Which resources can be allocated to support student needs during this crisis?

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Resources

In addition to the emerging solutions detailed in this brief, the following resources may help board members develop a fuller understanding of key issues related to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CSBA

- ▶ CSBA Brief: Challenging and Supporting English Learners in STEM Learning at a Distance: <https://bit.ly/3xnwhGa>
- ▶ CSBA Brief: Understanding and Addressing Disruptions to Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: <https://bit.ly/3xUzM7h>

Aspen Institute — Principles for Advancing Public Education Post-Crisis: <https://bit.ly/3k57jDS>

California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) — Distance Learning Webinars:

- ▶ Supporting English learners in distance learning: <https://bit.ly/3k8Btq3>
- ▶ Supporting highly mobile students, such as foster youth: <https://bit.ly/3kcjCP4>

California Department of Education

- ▶ Getting Internet Access: Available Plans: <https://bit.ly/2Zv6ZGZ>
- ▶ Resources for Mental Health Crises: <https://bit.ly/35xfx3M>
- ▶ Webinar on Safeguarding Students through Distance Learning: <https://bit.ly/2FwQxOZ>

Insight Education Group — Rubric to Helps Schools/Districts Reopening Equitably: <https://bit.ly/3mfmlcg>

EL RISE! — Webinar on Strategies to Support English Learners in Distance Learning: <https://bit.ly/2FeOQq1>

PACE

- ▶ Best Practices for Districts in Forming Expanded Learning Partnerships: <https://bit.ly/3tVRjj>
- ▶ Ten Recommendations to Help Educators and District Leaders Support Learning in the COVID-19 Context: <https://bit.ly/32o7STf>

Endnotes

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