

KEEPING EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT DURING COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES

With schools across Massachusetts closed to protect public health, families, educators and administrators find themselves in new and unknown territory. In many places, district and school leaders are working around the clock to figure out how to provide meals to students who depend on them, continue student learning, and otherwise support families.

While today's situation is challenging for all, it is especially perilous for our most vulnerable students – those who are economically disadvantaged (especially those struggling with food or housing insecurity), have disabilities, or are English learners. Moreover, as in any crisis, many young people of color, immigrant youth, and their families are facing challenges and risks above and beyond those faced by other Massachusetts residents.

As education leaders work to support families, below are 5 steps that are important for districts and the state to consider in order to preserve student well-being and promote instructional equity.

1

Provide clear, centralized, and regular communication to all families.

Create a user-friendly, multilingual online hub for families to receive up-to-date information and educational resources. The platform should allow families to access appropriate links on their school websites and submit questions that are addressed within 24-48 hours. Districts should also create an emergency task force to manage inquiries from families and appoint a director to oversee the task force who is solely focused on coordinating this communication. These task forces should be charged with leveraging all existing community infrastructure, including partnering with local civil rights organizations, nonprofits, and relevant media outlets, to ensure that information reaches every population.

2

Strive to meet students' immediate needs first.

Prioritize the physical and social-emotional needs of particularly vulnerable students in the following ways:

- **Address food insecurity:** Provide breakfast and lunch through multiple modes – at schools and/or community centers, as well as through meal drop-offs via school bus routes or other transportation partnerships – to students who rely on them. Districts that do not qualify for United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimbursement should work with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to identify other sources of funding to cover meal costs.
- **Support students with disabilities:** Disruptions brought on by school closures are particularly challenging for students with disabilities and their families. District leaders should work with schools to coordinate instructional and other supports for students with disabilities via telephone or internet and provide at-home study activities tailored to student needs. Students who receive physical or occupational therapy in school should continue to receive these services via videoconferencing, and districts should also establish multilingual hotlines staffed by in-house special education experts to help families support students at home.
- **Support newcomer students and students with limited formal education:** Consistent language and academic instruction are particularly important for newcomer students who are just beginning to learn English (Levels 1 and 2) and those that have had interrupted or limited schooling in the past. District leaders should work with schools to provide these students with at-home study activities, accompanied by frequent telephone and video-based instruction.
- **Support students who rely on school mental health services:** District leaders should set up multilingual hotlines for students to access mental health supports from school counselors, social workers and school psychologists.

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3

Work closely with other agencies to ensure students' at-home and public safety.

School and business closures and the COVID-19 threat are likely to exacerbate stress on families. They are also more likely to leave more young people unsupervised at home or in the community, and may be particularly dangerous for students who are housing insecure or in foster care. School districts should coordinate with other local and state agencies to ensure the safety of students and families, regardless of immigration status. District leaders should:

- Support and work with families to ensure that all children have adult supervision if household guardians must work during the day.
- Work with shelters, housing agencies and the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families to ensure that the district knows where each student is and how to reach them.
- Work with state agencies and local providers to identify available resources for families in distress (e.g., experiencing physical or mental health issues, or facing eviction or other stressors).
- Establish common, districtwide systems for touching base with every student (via email, phone or text message) and family once per week in the family's primary language and ensure availability of on-call district teams that can connect students and families to statewide and community services, if necessary. This includes communicating clear expectations to all school and district staff about their roles and providing training/guidance to educators on how to conduct outreach in culturally competent ways. District leaders should also inform families who their contact person will be and to expect to hear from them.
- Partner with local police departments to avoid over-policing of students of color, undocumented youth, and children with housing insecurity.

4

Ensure equitable access to learning resources.

Missed learning time can be especially harmful to students who are already underserved in our schools. At the same time, inequitable access to technology and the internet, a lack of online teaching preparedness, and inadequate resources for families trying to support their children's education may widen disparities instead of narrowing them. We urge district leaders to:

- Create and regularly distribute multilingual toolkits in digital and paper form for every grade level and major subject area to families, at least until remote learning structures are up and running, so that families can continue to support their child's learning at home and have evidence-informed rigorous activities on hand to help them do so.
- Develop a text-message/phone-based multilingual survey to assess families' technological resources and needs – including devices available to students, internet access, as well as students' other responsibilities and available adult supports in the home – in order to ensure equitable distance learning.
- Partner with businesses and internet providers to provide laptops/tablets and expanded internet service to students who do not currently have them, so all students can access remote learning opportunities.

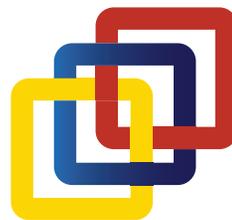
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- Ensure that instructional approaches meet the needs of English learners and students with disabilities. Prioritize giving these student groups and their families frequent phone and video-based educator support in a language that they can understand.
- Coordinate with homeless shelters and other facilities serving housing-insecure families to ensure that children have the space and resources they need to participate in distance learning.
- Provide professional development to educators so they can become effective facilitators of distance learning, leaning on the expertise of schools and institutions that already engage in this practice, such as universities or online K-12 providers with track records of success.

5

Accelerate long-term planning.

Since the disruptions and stress caused by COVID-19 are likely to impact students long after schools re-open, the state should support district leaders in working with community education and youth development organizations to start planning now for the challenges to come, including how to leverage the summer months and how to structure the 2021 school year. Determining the extent of learning loss will be critical to triaging student need upon return to school. Plans should address how districts will assess learning loss, support students who are struggling academically and students in transition years (e.g., high school seniors or eighth graders), and provide mental health and counseling support that many will need. Districts should leverage additional funding through the Student Opportunity Act to support these plans and reallocate any remaining 2020 state assessment resources to re-entry assessments.



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