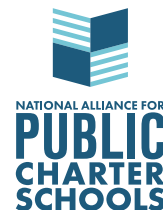


LEARNING IN REAL TIME

HOW CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVED STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 CLOSURES

AUGUST 2020



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FOREWORD

By their very nature, charter schools are independent. These unique public schools typically operate outside the school district. One of the hallmarks of their independence is the inherent flexibility of the model. This flexibility allows educators to tailor the learning experience to the needs of their student population without having to answer to a centralized district bureaucracy. This flexibility could lead to more instructional time in math if that is what students need. It might also mean creating a learning environment with a focus on science or the arts. Often, charter schools use their flexibility to extend the length of the school day or the school year, which can create supportive environments for students while also providing additional support for working parents.

But what happened in spring 2020 when the coronavirus outbreak forced the immediate and unplanned closure of nearly every Pre-K to 12 school in America? No one could have predicted these widespread closures, and no one was truly ready. Many wondered aloud whether the school closures would be for a few weeks or for the remainder of the school year. Adding to the uncertainty of a public health crisis that literally shut down the world, parents and teachers were struggling to bring some sense of normalcy to elementary and secondary students who would have to begin learning full-time at home. During this time, did charter schools use their flexibilities to help serve students well? Were there differences in the way charter schools and district schools were able to respond?

Almost immediately after schools closed, we began to see anecdotal evidence that charter schools were reacting quickly and serving students well. Conversely, we saw and heard stories about students in district schools who received little or no instruction for months. Collective bargaining agreements in many district schools stymied efforts to provide remote instruction. In some cases, teachers were expressly discouraged from teaching any students until there could be assurances that every student had equitable access.

We also heard about charter school leaders who were able to resume instruction in as little as 48 hours. Sometimes, the solutions were technology enabled, moving everyone online quickly. At other schools, where families lacked digital devices and access to internet connectivity, charter school leaders used other creative solutions like broadcasting lessons on public access television stations and setting up grab and go stations for families to pick up lesson packets. Teachers kept in touch with students and parents by text message, email, and phone calls. Many also figured out a way to continue providing meals and other community resources, not only to their own students but also to the entire community.

While the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) captured the rapid way in which 18 high-performing, larger charter school networks responded to COVID-19, less is known about the smaller networks and schools that represent over 65% of the charter school landscape. This paper offers evidence that they too were able to respond quickly and take advantage of the freedom and flexibility that are built into the charter school model to respond to families. Vignettes in this report will highlight some of the charter school leaders who exemplify the very best of resourcefulness. These profiles of a geographically and racially diverse



group of schools include stories from communities in New York and Washington state that were at the epicenter of COVID-19 infection, as well as schools in other communities that were affected differently.

When they heard about these bright spots in charter school communities, our team at the National Alliance became curious about whether these schools were outliers or indicators of a larger trend. Was it just a handful of schools? Are there unique features of charter schools that made them better enabled to react to COVID-19 school closures? What exactly did charter schools do well? Are there any things district schools did better than charter schools? What were the key differences in terms of response between these two types of public schools?

These are some of the questions that led us to work with our research partner, Public Impact, on a project to explore indicators of these differences that could be found in the public domain. We are aware of the limitations of this study design, as it relied heavily on publicly reported information

on school websites. And yet it offers important information that helps to provide some insight into patterns. There is surely additional and more comprehensive research to be done on this topic. We encourage others to build on this early snapshot. We, too, will continue to explore this issue.

Before the coronavirus struck, charter schools were already innovative, finding better ways to serve students who have traditionally been underserved—and delivering exceptional results. In the months and years ahead, we will learn more about how public schools responded to closures during the pandemic and what should be done in the future to better serve students who were all impacted in some way.

Debbie Veney
Senior Vice President, Communications and Marketing

Todd Ziebarth
Senior Vice President, State Advocacy and Support





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Charter schools appear more likely than school districts to set expectations that teachers:**
 - ▶ Engage directly with students to provide instruction.
 - ▶ Provide real-time instruction.
 - ▶ Check in regularly with students.
 - ▶ Monitor attendance.
 - 2. School districts and charter schools were about equally likely to require the distribution of devices for online learning.**
 - 3. Charter schools appear less likely than school districts to ensure internet access for all students.**
 - 4. Few charter schools or school districts clearly communicate on websites how schools will support students with disabilities during COVID-19 closures.**
-

When schools across the country began closing in March 2020 to limit the spread of COVID-19, almost none had a plan for making the transition to at-home learning.

Millions of students in public schools—both district and charter—quickly felt the impact. Families struggled to support their children’s at-home learning and engagement, while some schools spent weeks setting up systems to provide food first, and then education materials, instruction, and, in many cases, access to technology.

In March, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) began to shed light on these responses through an online database tracking how some of the nation’s largest public school districts shifted instruction, student support, and organizational operations in response to the closures¹. They continued this work with a nationally representative sample of all U.S. public school districts.

Since charter schools serve millions of public school students and have different autonomies from district schools, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (National Alliance) and Public Impact created a database of 356 charter school operators, similar to the one [CPRE created in the spring](#). The nationally representative sample includes charter management organizations, education management organizations, and operators of one or two charter schools.

Our analysis here focuses on eight indicators from the CRPE dataset that allowed national comparisons between charter schools and districts. (See details of indicators in appendix.) Like the CRPE dataset, this research relied entirely on what charter school operators reported publicly on their websites and through social media. As a result, although we may not have found evidence of a particular action, it does not necessarily mean that an operator didn’t engage in that action. It may just mean that the operator didn’t make information about the action available on their website or through social media.



Additionally, our coding reflects what schools said they planned to do or reported doing but may not reflect actual implementation.

Within the wide range of responses, we found that on average, when compared to districts, charter schools had stronger expectations for teachers to provide direct instruction, provide real-time instruction, and to check in with students and

families. But they appeared less likely to provide home or community internet hotspots.

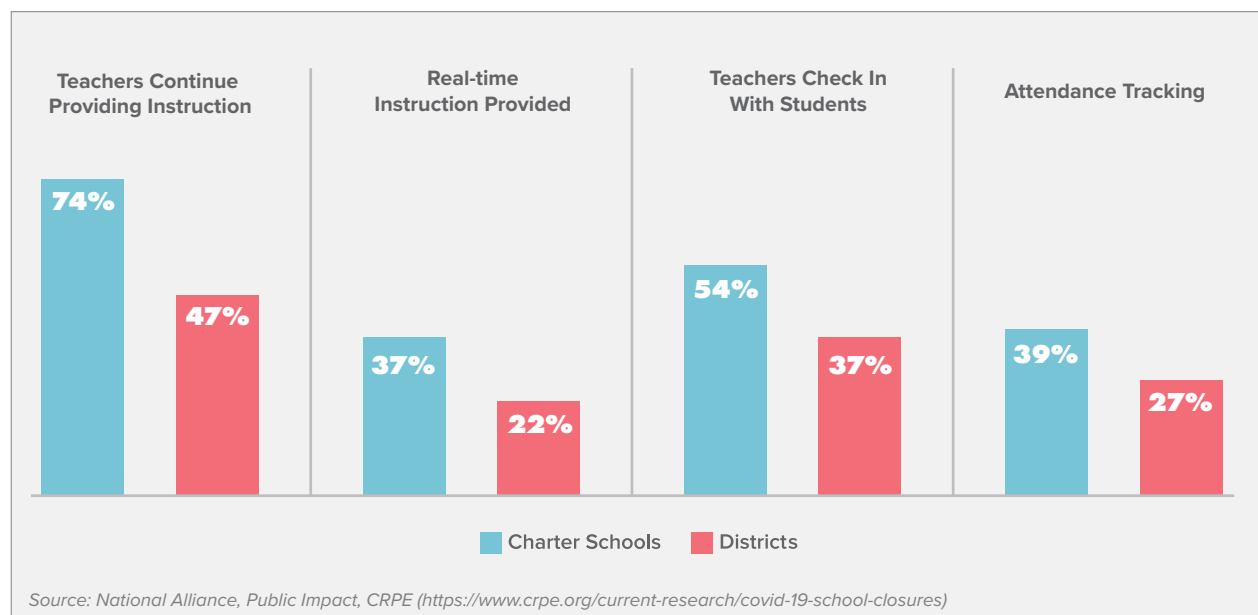
This fall, which likely will bring continued disruptions from the pandemic, all public schools can work to improve access and consider changes to schedules, instruction delivery, and student progress monitoring to address learning losses.

Charter schools are more likely than districts to expect teachers to engage directly with students

On two key components of instruction, charter schools surpassed districts in reaching students: by expecting teachers to continue providing instruction, and by expecting them to provide that real-time instruction—live, though not in person—at least part of the time. The school closures highlighted anew the impact of high-quality teaching and strong student relationships on student outcomes. Synchronous, or real-time, instruction provides the most benefit, especially for the most vulnerable students.² We found that 74% of charter schools expect teachers to provide instruction during COVID-19 school closures,

compared with just 47% of school districts. Further, 38% of charter schools expected real-time learning, compared with 22% of districts. Charter schools are also more likely to expect teachers to check in regularly with students and track attendance.

Though we saw higher expectations from charter schools, the percentage of charter schools expecting real-time instruction and attendance tracking fell below 40%.

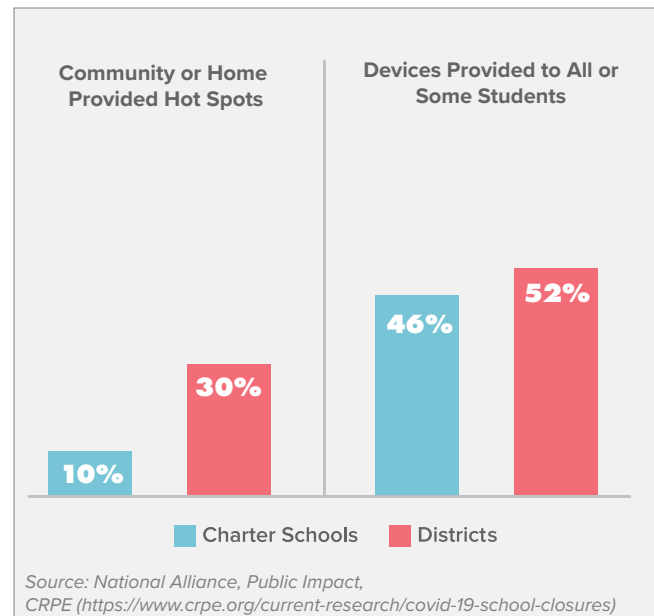




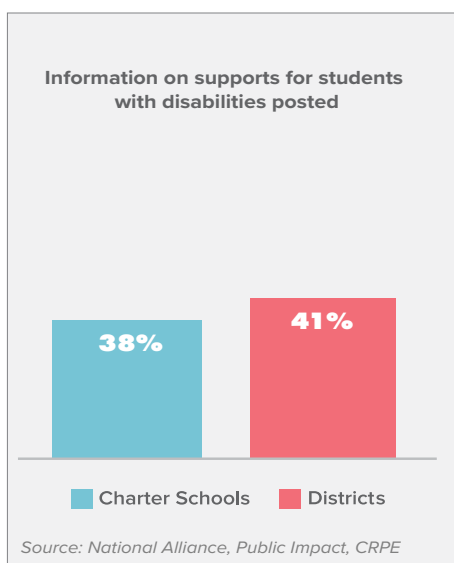
Both charter schools and districts must do more to close the digital divide

The need to address the digital divide is similar across districts and charter schools. An estimated one of every five charter school students (22%) and district school students (19%) lack internet access, and approximately one of every eight charter school (13%) and district school (11%) students do not have a device at home.³

Most distance learning plans developed in response to COVID-19 rely on access to devices and an internet connection. Although charter schools are about as likely as districts to provide devices (46% versus 52%), they appear much less likely (10% versus 30%) than districts to provide internet access. One of the main reasons may be that districts and larger charter school networks have more resources to purchase connections for their students than smaller single-site schools, which comprise the majority of organizations reviewed. With modified distance learning likely to continue into the fall, technology access is essential to prevent or address learning losses due to COVID-19.



Both charter schools and districts should increase communication about their support for students with disabilities



Only 38% of charter school leaders and 41% of district school leaders clearly communicate through websites or social media how schools will support students with disabilities during the closures. While leaders may be communicating to families through other means, reports suggest that as many as 40% of special education students lost all support and services during school closures.⁴ Student needs and appropriate services vary greatly with the shift to at-home learning. Headed into the fall, families of students with disabilities will especially need clear resources that communicate modifications for students with disabilities—whether that information is posted on the website, shared in a private portal, or communicated through direct outreach to parents.

LESSONS FOR THE FALL

At-home learning will likely continue in some form in fall 2020, so school leaders of all kinds need to learn from their spring experiences and continue to adapt. Charter school leaders can take advantage of the autonomy that defines them to make needed shifts.

To ensure students keep learning, we know charter school leaders need to:

- ▶ Expect teachers to **directly engage** with students through live instruction and regular check-ins.
- ▶ Provide **instructional supports** to teachers and require use of high-standards curricula.
- ▶ Ensure **100% of students** have access to an internet-connected device.
- ▶ **Clearly communicate** modifications to services for students with disabilities.

To further support students and families, researchers need to gather more robust data this fall on what supports public schools—both district and charter—are and are not providing. For example, researchers in the education field should survey a nationally representative sample of families to ask questions like:

- ▶ How many minutes a day is your student receiving instruction?
- ▶ How often is your student receiving a phone call, text, or email from a teacher or staff member?
- ▶ Is instruction being tailored to your student's learning needs?
- ▶ What level of support and interaction are you receiving from your child's school?

While these initial spring data provide an opportunity for us to begin identifying where there are gaps in support, there is still a lot of information the field needs to know to fully understand how COVID-19 affected our students and schools.



DIVING DEEPER

PROFILES OF SCHOOLS RESPONDING TO COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES

The data our researchers collected by reviewing school websites and social media posts provide a high-level picture of how the charter school sector publicly communicated their plans to support student learning during school closures in the spring. They tell just part of the story, however, because any plan is only as effective as its implementation. And online documents capture only so much of what schools actually did.

We identified five examples of charter schools that seemed to transition to at-home learning with some degree of success.⁵ Among the other common factors of these schools that are profiled, each one was funded by the [Charter Schools Program](#). Of course, there are no established metrics for successful teaching and learning during a pandemic, nor do we have student performance results from this time. Hence, we sought to study schools with:

- ▶ A track record of academic achievement before schools closed (giving them an understanding of what academic excellence looks like).
- ▶ A comprehensive at-home learning plan that addressed students' academic and social-emotional needs.
- ▶ A range of models that serve a mix of grade levels, geographies, and students (see profiles for background on each school).

We do not claim that these schools are the best nationally. Rather, because of their prior strong performance and rapid instructional shifts during COVID-19, they may offer helpful examples and highlight commonalities for other schools—including

both charter and district—to consider as they shape their own approaches to at-home learning and navigating emergencies.

As the data identified, charter schools—more than districts—kept students directly engaged with staff throughout the spring. In our vignettes, we identified five common ways the profiled schools shifted their operations to maintain student-school connections and center on student support:

- 1. Prioritizing relationships and outreach.** All the charter schools we studied prioritized student and family outreach from the moment schools closed through the end of the school year (and often, afterward as well). Rather than using distance as a reason to step back, staff at each of these schools found new ways to connect and ensure students were safe and learning.
- 2. Expanding the role of school.** In addition to educating students and providing their normal array of student supports, the charter schools profiled quickly expanded their role to meet students' and families' urgent, basic needs. They rallied partners, vendors, and funders who in turn helped families pay rent, put dinner on the table, apply for benefits, and access mental health care.
- 3. Continuing academic learning.** The challenges to continued learning over the spring were tremendous. Nonetheless, all the charter schools we studied took steps to keep providing rigorous academic learning, even as they adjusted expectations for students, given the demands and realities of at-home learning during a pandemic. Often, school leaders saw continued academic learning as a source



of social-emotional support for students—a constant in a rapidly changing and uncertain world.

- 4. Adapting how learning happens.** All the charter schools we studied redesigned the way they deliver instruction. They landed on different models, with some following a structured daily schedule with live sessions and others relying on asynchronous instruction to maximize flexibility. Despite these differences, they shared a belief that effective at-home learning included more than just posting online assignments that students would have otherwise completed in class.

- 5. Implementing a feedback loop.** The schools we profiled intentionally redesigned the way they deliver instruction and interact with students and families to address the extraordinary circumstances that COVID-19 brought. Nonetheless, school leaders knew they would not immediately get everything right. In response, they invited students and families to share feedback and adjusted quickly to improve.

Of course, there is much more behind each of these decisions, including late nights, difficult trade-offs, and legions of teachers who often went well beyond what anyone could reasonably expect. The profiles that follow share some of those stories.

KEY LESSONS FROM OUR FOCUS SCHOOLS

SCHOOL	KEY LESSONS
DREAM Charter School	• Expanded student services to meet extreme family needs • Provided real-time instruction across all grade levels • Created a mental health referral program and assigned case workers • Required weekly check-ins with every student, with higher frequency for those who struggled to stay engaged • Designed equitable grading policies to accommodate students who had to bear additional challenges and responsibilities
Amana Academy	• Moved to fully operational online learning systems during the first weekend of school closure • Provided real-time instruction across all grade levels • Prioritized social-emotional learning • Used flexibility in staffing to ensure one-on-one supports for every student receiving special education services • Established a continuous feedback loop with families, regularly adapting its distance learning model to meet family needs
Briya Public Charter School	• Expanded student services and deepened community partnerships to meet extreme family needs • Adjusted its adult education curricula according to student circumstances • Designed a distance learning model for early childhood students • Sent home learning tools to pair with weekly activities • Prioritized community support and connection above all else
Impact Public Schools	• Designed new systems to create easily navigable online classrooms • Provided real-time instruction across all grade levels • Adjusted curricula to be more relevant to students' daily lives • Prioritized social-emotional learning • Established a continuous feedback loop with families, adapting its instructional delivery according to family preferences for the fall
Excel Academy Charter Schools	• Created a counseling website dedicated exclusively to mental health and wellness supports • Adjusted curricula to encourage ongoing student engagement in the case of unexpected absence • Developed an extensive tracking system to monitor student engagement and progress • Expanded its summer program for students who struggled to stay engaged in the spring • Started planning for changes to its instructional delivery for fall 2020 before the school year ended



CARING FOR A COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

DREAM CHARTER SCHOOL

Founded⁶

2008

Location

East Harlem and South Bronx,
New York

Grades Served

Pre-K to 12

Students Enrolled

900

Student Demographics

87% economically

disadvantaged

6% English language learners

32% students with disabilities

Accolades

DREAM has outperformed the district, city, and state in both ELA and math proficiency for four years running.

Noteworthy Facts

DREAM employs its high school students to help run summer programs for younger students. Although New York City cut funding for all summer youth programs, DREAM committed to continue giving its high school students paid opportunities.



The DREAM Charter School network started not as a school, but as a broader effort to support kids in one East Harlem community. In fact, DREAM (formerly known as Harlem RBI) was building baseball fields and giving children opportunities to play, learn, and grow both on and off the diamond as a sports-based youth development organization for more than 15 years before it opened its first school.

DREAM grew to serve more than 900 East Harlem and South Bronx students in four schools in 2019–20, but it still considers itself a community-based organization. So, when COVID-19 forced the school to close its doors in March, it responded not just as a school network, but as a partner committed to the health and well-being of the families it serves.

MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS

DREAM's response started with calls to every family to understand how they were faring and what, if anything, they needed. DREAM quickly developed a network-wide dashboard to organize the information staff collected and identify trends. When the dashboard showed that many families faced food insecurity, leaders collaborated with community partners to set up distribution points where families could pick up meals. DREAM also created a referral program that assigned case workers to students presenting emerging mental health needs. And as the spring progressed, DREAM found that a growing



number of families needed cash assistance, so the school set up an emergency fund. As of mid-July, DREAM raised \$50,000 in donations for the fund and provided some level of direct financial support to the more than 100 families who applied.

As important as food, mental health services, and cash were, school leaders knew it was equally important for students to keep learning, both to stay on track academically and to provide stability and consistency as so much changed around them. Teachers identified which families needed a device or internet access, and the IT team got to work procuring the resources students would need. Less than a week after school closed, DREAM invited families to pick up the tools necessary to meet students' technology and instructional needs. According to DREAM Managing Director of Schools Lori Riddick, the network's middle school students were among the first to arrive, often on their own and eager to dig in.

BALANCING HIGH EXPECTATIONS WITH EMPATHY

DREAM's leaders knew that even with all the right hardware in hand, many students would find learning difficult. They lived in the pandemic's epicenter, and early surveys showed that nearly 60% of DREAM's parents and guardians were essential workers. As instructional leaders developed an online learning system, they sought to balance high academic expectations with a sensitivity to the many challenges families faced.

"We talk a lot about equity and what students are facing when they are outside of school," DREAM Chief Education Officer Eve Colavito said. "Here was a chance when we could bring it all together [because]...the reality of external responsibilities, mental

health, and family financial challenges were more out of our control than they ever had been before."

As a pre-K to 12 network, DREAM needed to offer students different learning options based on grade level. For example, high school students generally needed maximal flexibility as they cared for family members or went to work themselves. Younger students generally thrived with more live instruction. As a result, most pre-K to 5 instruction took place through live lessons, while middle and high school students participated in two live periods each day, but conducted most of their lessons independently and asynchronously.

Teachers also did their best to ensure equitable access to instruction by providing individual support when students could not log on. In addition, school leaders designed grading policies that rewarded the work students completed rather than penalizing them for what they missed.

LEANING ON RELATIONSHIPS

Meanwhile, weekly check-ins with students and their families continued throughout the spring in order to stay in touch and solve problems when





necessary. If, for example, a student did not log on for class or missed assignments, teachers followed up to ask what was happening at home and figure out how best to keep students learning. In some cases, the fix was as simple as scheduling a wake-up call 30 minutes before class started. In others, students made a plan to connect with a teacher during office hours or create a targeted tutorial session with their teacher to get caught up. And in instances where it was clear students could not complete all their work given the other demands in their lives, teachers helped them to focus on the most critical assignments.

Colavito says this check-in and problem-solving process brought staff closer to families than ever before. “While these were strong relationships before,” Colavito said, “teachers were literally [gathering information virtually from] people’s living rooms and at their breakfast table, learning intimately what was going on.”

In a video interview, DREAM grandparent Mildred Maneiro expressed gratitude for the support. “Distance learning has been hard for a lot of families, and I’m not going to say it hasn’t been hard for ours,” Maneiro said. “But to have the support of DREAM there for us has been the best thing. We’re not lost.”

DRAWING ON DATA

As a network of four schools in two communities, DREAM didn’t just rely on personal connections; leaders also drew on the tracking system it developed. Staff logged every family interaction as well as data on assignments, attendance, neighborhood incidents, and any concerns or needs families expressed.

The database allowed leaders to look for trends across schools and to set realistic expectations for students and staff. For example, when student attendance was hovering around 60% at the network’s newest school, leaders turned to the data. First, they compared attendance at that campus to others in the network to confirm that

it really was low, even with all the extenuating circumstances families faced. Next, they ruled out internet connectivity as a cause by confirming that students had devices and internet access. Then, they looked for signs that families might be facing additional stressors, which they didn’t find.

These questions and answers led leaders to conclude the real issue was a lack of family engagement. Teachers called families, confirmed that they were doing fine, and explained that distance learning wasn’t optional. They also took steps to get kids excited about “coming” to class each day by previewing upcoming lessons or class events. Before long, attendance bumped up.

“The data has been really instrumental in showing us that higher attendance was possible,” Riddick said. “It pushed the team to know that we can improve.”

A CENTRAL COMMITMENT TO FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Throughout the spring, DREAM’s teachers stood out as real change-makers. “To see how nimble and persistent and creative they have been just reminds me how brilliant they are,” said Katie Doctor, managing director of educational strategy and data.

“There’s a moment in crisis where you can have people step up or step back,” Riddick said, “and people here have really stepped up.”

Despite the long hours and grueling circumstances, or perhaps because of them, staff said they grew closer. In fact, survey results showed that staff felt more positive about DREAM and their work in the spring than they had in the fall.

“I feel really proud of our team and our kids,” Riddick said, “managing all of the anxiety and still showing up as their best selves and working with the challenges...people have taken our values and vision and have really made them come to life.”



RESPONDING WITH A SENSE OF NORMALCY

AMANA ACADEMY

Founded⁷

2004

Location

Alpharetta, Georgia (Atlanta campus coming in 2021)

Grades Served

K-8

Students Enrolled

721

Student Demographics

45% qualify for free or

reduced-price lunch

20% English Language Learners

8% Students with Disability

Accolades

In 2018, Amana earned the highest score of all Georgia charter schools in the state's accountability system (CCRPI)

Noteworthy Facts

Amana is an EL Education school (formerly known as Expeditionary Learning) and STEM-certified through the state department of education.

Amana also offers students more than 20 clubs.



The decision to close all of Georgia's public schools in response to COVID-19 came on a Thursday afternoon in March 2020. As soon as Dr. Cherisse Campbell and her team at Amana Academy received the news, they got to work making sure their more than 700 K through 8 students could log into class from home the following Tuesday. From that moment until the very last day of school in May, the Amana staff focused on doing everything possible to maintain a sense of normalcy and stability for their students.

"Our goal was to have our kids and families feel like they never missed a beat," Campbell said. "We saw this as not just an academic response, but as a social-emotional one. Some kids were hanging onto the familiarity of school life for stability. So yes, our goal was to prioritize high-quality instruction, but what we were really prioritizing was having a safe space that maintains a sense of normalcy amidst rapid change."

GOING VIRTUAL

Campbell and her team worked around the clock the first days after school closed to ensure all students could participate in online learning. They overhauled that Friday's planned professional development so teachers could learn how to navigate online platforms like Google Classroom and Screencast-O-Matic. Over the weekend, staff created detailed planning documents and a new Amana Academy Virtual website as parents' go-to source for all information,



and they surveyed families about their technology needs. They also called every family to check in, share the instructional plan, and answer questions.

When class commenced Tuesday morning, nearly all students had a device, access to the internet, and a full day of instruction waiting for them. And as they logged on, students started their day as they would in person, with crew time, a morning meeting aimed at building culture and deepening relationships within the school. “It felt like launching a space shuttle,” Campbell said, “but we did it.”

ITERATING ON ACADEMICS

The first phase of at-home learning emphasized flexibility and personalized support. Leaders recognized the regular school schedule wouldn’t work for everyone at home, so they encouraged students to log in, view the video instruction teachers created, and do their assignments when they could. But the model also included opportunities for real-time instruction, often in small groups. In kindergarten, this time translated to groups of four or five students at similar performance levels meeting with the teacher for 20 to 30 minutes four times a week. Upper-grade students participated in personalized small-group lessons in English language arts and math at least once a week. Amana also prioritized special education services. Staff sent home manipulatives and offered parents online trainings. Meanwhile, the school’s occupational therapist and speech therapist immediately transitioned their services to Zoom.

While Amana moved its school model online in just a few days, staff knew they hadn’t perfected it just yet. At the end of the first week, Campbell invited families to provide feedback in a virtual town hall. Although the 100 families who attended expressed gratitude for how quickly Amana moved instruction online, many also found the daily expectations overwhelming. Between work schedules, caring for family members, juggling academics for multiple children, and addressing their own fears and needs, parents admitted they were struggling to help their

students complete all of the learning activities Amana expected every day.

Leaders listened and adjusted. In week two, teachers began sharing prioritized daily lesson plans so parents could focus each day on the activities with the greatest impact if they could not complete them all. An even bigger change came after spring break; students returned to a four-day instructional week (Tuesday to Friday). In addition to giving families and students time to make up work they could not get to during the rest of the week, the four-day instructional schedule provided an opportunity to incorporate key elements of Amana’s academic model.

Amana Academy is an EL Education (formerly known as Expeditionary Learning) school that uses an integrated science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curriculum. Staff believe students grow most through experiential, project-based learning tailored to the whole child and connected to their community. With the art, STEM, Arabic, physical education, and other specialist teachers leading the way, Mondays became a time for students to take virtual field trips and interact with core content in the larger world. School leaders also encouraged staff and families to use Mondays as a time to refocus on mental health, and counseling staff offered group therapy sessions and guided activities for students.

Staff also responded quickly when they saw a problem. For example, the special education team noticed some of their students struggling in their usual small groups as sessions moved online, so they shifted to a one-on-one support model. To do so, every staff member without direct teaching responsibilities—from paraprofessionals to administrators—received professional development so they could help as needed. Staff also did their best to work around families’ schedules, sometimes meeting with students in the evenings after their parents got off work.

Campbell and her team continued their feedback and improvement loop throughout the rest of the



school year: observing what was working and what wasn't, soliciting input from families through town halls and surveys, adjusting their approach in response, and repeating.

FOUNDATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Though Campbell's team wasn't able to engage every student every day as they hoped, she estimates that about 80% of students regularly logged on for class and completed their work. The school credits a focus on rigorous, thoughtful instruction as key to achieving that level of engagement. A commitment to strengthening the strong relationships seeded in the school community before closure was another.

"Everybody wanted it to work," Campbell said. "Our teachers believed that families and kids wanted to do well. So it's our job to figure out the right systems that allow our families and students to engage and succeed."

Those systems included weekly check-in calls with families, regular office hours where students could talk about coursework or how they were feeling, a hotline for English language arts and math support, and even text messages reminding students or families that class started in 30 minutes when needed. If one teacher couldn't reach a student, another would try. "I spent a lot of time on the phone with parents, checking in and reassuring them that family stability is number one and the academics will come," elementary STEM teacher Patti Atkinson said.

Amana also made sure to celebrate student growth and success. Most notably, Amana continued its tradition of having its eighth-graders create and present capstone projects reflecting on their learning journey before graduation. Other online celebrations encouraged students to consider how they could be both a better friend and a change-maker, even during this difficult time.

Similarly, staff supported one another as they redesigned Amana's school model for online

learning, balanced teaching their students with keeping their own children happy and on task, and navigated the emotional toll, uncertainty, and fear that COVID-19 brought.

"The best part [of this experience] was working as a team," said Nicole Woodard, the head of the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department. "We all know what each other's strengths are, so if we ever have questions, we know who to reach out to."

When the school year ended on May 22, staff were tired, but proud—proud of the innovation they had shown, the grace they had allowed themselves and one another, and the 100-page-plus operating manual they had created to maneuver through an uncertain fall. And they were especially proud of the perseverance their students had demonstrated.

Rising eighth-grader Elijah Rose agreed. "I'm proud of our school for pushing forward," he said. "Academically, I definitely rose up from where I was before to where I am now."



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES AT A DISTANCE

BRIYA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

Founded

2006

Location

Washington, D.C.

Grades Served

Pre-K3, Pre-K4, Adult Education

Students Enrolled

718⁸

Student Demographics

89% eligible for free or

reduced-price lunch⁹

82% English Language Learners¹⁰

20% students with disabilities

Accolades

Briya has earned a Tier 1 rating from the D.C. Public Charter School Board every year since the rankings were established.

Noteworthy Facts

Briya was founded as part of a U.S. Department of Education demonstration project “Even Start” in 1989. The program originally aimed to serve immigrant families arriving from Central America and Vietnam.



Briya Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., isn't a typical school. Its two-generation model serves students ages 5 and under, as well as 18 and over, many of whom are English-language learners. Some are even part of the same family. Although Briya's early childhood and adult education programs are distinct, the two intersect through weekly Family Time when children and parents participate together. In addition, Briya provides a suite of wrap-around supports for its families covering everything from health care to employment, and positioning education as only one piece of Briya's vision for family wellness, albeit an essential one. Hence, as Briya and other public schools across the District of Columbia closed, its leaders knew they would have to again find new and unique ways to support students academically and beyond.

PROVIDING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

COVID-19 brought nearly all Briya families a new set of extreme challenges. On top of working or finding employment, many of Briya's adult learners had to shift their children to distance learning as they continued their own education online as well. Even while attending to a flood of urgent personal needs, Briya's staff looked for ways to keep students learning. The IT team worked with families to secure devices and an internet connection, while teachers figured out how best to deliver instruction remotely.



After taking time to plan, the team at Briya was able to quickly shift to online learning. Adult classes were completely asynchronous to maximize flexibility and allow students to review content as much as they wanted. Teachers differentiated instruction based on students' English proficiency and tapped platforms students were already using to engage students. Each week, students received videos and activities. Students could also participate in community group chats or receive optional expansion activities through WhatsApp. At the end of the week, an exit ticket assessed student work and provided teachers an opportunity to solicit feedback.

Meanwhile, in Briya's Pre-K classrooms, teachers provided a mix of real-time and asynchronous lessons. On Mondays, students received a video from their teacher explaining the literacy and math tasks for the week, which always included social-emotional and art-based activities. Families could log into Briya's student portal to access activities organized by objective, and staff sent home learning tools to support the week's tasks. During measurement week, for example, families received a measuring tape with a list of ideas for incorporating measurement into daily life.



In addition, teachers hosted regular circle times online. Teachers recognized early on that these sessions could be a bit chaotic, so they brainstormed ways to both teach students new routines and make online learning more engaging. They sent home whiteboards for students to use and incorporated puppets and other visual tools to keep students' attention. Teachers also looked for opportunities to encourage student voice, including inviting students to share things from home with the class.

"To see what they [Pre-K students] were doing with the art supplies, with the ideas... to see how excited they were to show up to these meetings," reflected Lisa Luceno, senior director of early childhood strategy. "They stayed engaged and demonstrated their resilience despite really difficult circumstances. And we know the trauma young children are experiencing is very different and acute, and yet they maintained relationships with their teachers and their peers." By the end of June, nearly every Pre-K student "attended class" in some way.

SHIFTING FROM STUDENT SUPPORT TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Student support is a big piece of Briya's work. A student services coordinator works at each of its four campuses with the express purpose of connecting families with services like health care and housing support and empowering them to advocate for themselves. But as COVID-19 closed not only schools, but the restaurants, hotels, and other businesses where many Briya students worked, the school saw students' needs rise to unprecedented levels. According to Student Services Coordinator Wendy Flores, the percentage of families living without basic needs like access to food, clothing, and secure housing jumped from 4% pre-COVID to 40% in a matter of weeks.

Briya staff responded immediately, moving well outside their typical student supports into a crisis management role. School leaders reassigned staff to call families and check in. The Student Services team posted need-to-know information



on Briya's website, including details on new eviction protections, information on which area food banks were open, and updates on other community supports. The school doubled down on its partnership with Mary's Center, a community medical and social services center, to provide families therapy in addition to basic health services. Together with Mary's Center, Briya staff also helped families access the DC Cares Program fund, which provided financial support for residents ineligible for stimulus checks and unemployment benefits. And as other partners closed their community centers, Briya attempted to fill the gaps. School leaders fundraised to provide all 600 families a Visa gift card, and the board of directors expanded emergency fundraising efforts.



FINDING BALANCE, MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS

It became difficult for many adult students to fully engage in class after schools closed, as they juggled additional child care responsibilities, the stresses related to job loss and an uncertain future, and the additional challenges low English proficiency and digital literacy skills posed. In addition to providing adult students as much flexibility in their learning as possible, Briya staff constantly looked for opportunities to connect with adult students in new ways.

As one example, when teachers scheduled the first virtual child development course, they intentionally chose topics they knew their adult students wanted to learn more about. Students could access the first session, "How to Talk to Your Child about COVID-19," and those that followed through live Zoom meetings or through recordings. Teachers also continued offering similar child development sessions on a weekly basis.

And if adult students didn't log in or turn in assignments, Briya staff continued to connect with and encourage them. In fact, someone at Briya checked in with every family every week to see how they were doing and if they needed anything.

"Although Briya closed the doors to its school," adult student Rosario Sanchez reflected, "it did not close its doors to me."



DESIGNING A NEW SCHOOL MODEL FOR A NEW REALITY

IMPACT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Founded¹¹

2018

Location

Tukwila, Washington

Grades Served

K through 2 (with plans to grow to K through 5—adding grades to the original campus and adding three more campuses in the coming years)

Students Enrolled

285

Student Demographics

65% from low-income families
29% English language learners
4% students with disabilities

Accolades

In Impact's first year, scholars made large gains in reading and math on nationally normed tests; on average, students performed below the national norm in the fall, and above the national norm by the year's end.¹²

Noteworthy Facts

Impact serves many immigrant and refugee families; 11 languages are spoken in the school.



Jen Wickens loves school design. The opportunity to design an innovative, equity-driven model that develops the whole child was one of the reasons she co-founded Impact Public Schools, a growing charter network in Seattle that served students in grades K through 2 during the 2019-20 school year. She just didn't anticipate that she and her team would need to redesign Impact only two years after opening, when COVID-19 forced schools across the country to close.

MEETING STUDENTS' NEEDS

Wickens and her team knew it would take time to move learning online, especially because students did not already have the technology they would need. But the team also knew students and families needed learning to continue as the state enacted its stay-at-home order. So, two days before Impact closed, students received instructional packets to cover the next month and a half. Staff began checking in with families twice a week to maintain a connection and identify any urgent needs. School leaders also worked with local partners to ensure families had access to food, and they coordinated with service providers to move supports for students with learning disabilities online. In addition, even before the school closed, they launched a GoFundMe campaign to purchase devices and hotspots, which immediately went viral. In just four days, Impact raised enough money to give all students the technology they needed to learn from home.

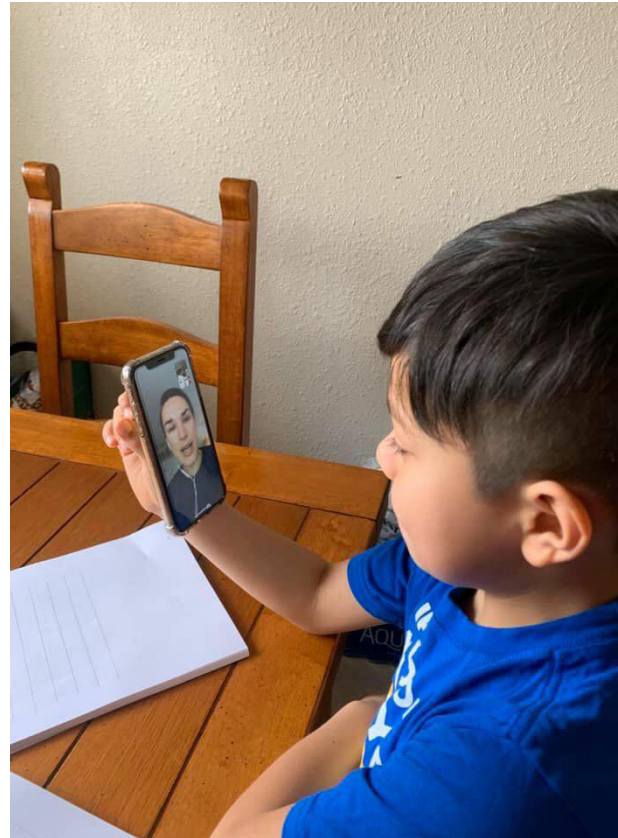


REDESIGNING A SCHOOL

Meanwhile, Impact's leaders spent long nights redesigning their instruction for online delivery. They landed on a model that largely followed the rhythm of a typical day in the building, with a mix of personalized learning and social-emotional enrichment. From 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., students moved through whole-class sessions, small groups, and additional individualized instruction. Their "An Impact at Home" webpage guided students, visually displaying student rotations with direct links where needed. In addition, Impact created an online radio station that played a morning message from the principal and reminded scholars when it was time to make a transition.

Students spent about two hours daily in real-time sessions, starting with a whole-class, teacher-led advisory time that focused on social-emotional learning and ending with a community circle. In the middle of the day, teachers led 30-minute real-time small groups in literacy and math for students performing at similar skill levels. Throughout the rest of the day, students engaged with asynchronous instruction, including blocks set aside for recess, read-alouds, and enrichment activities that students could choose.

Impact made sure to layer on its more distinctive elements as well, including project-based learning where students consider how a narrator's location and identity shape their perspective and how they tell a story. Every spring, students create a project related to the community, producing research, writing, and art. To make these projects possible and relevant, Wickens and her team sent supplies to students—crayons, glue, colored paper, a journal, and books—and shifted the project topic from birds to "community helpers" who use their careers and free time to support neighbors during COVID-19. By the end of the school year, students created letters of gratitude and designed artwork to celebrate these helpers with their classmates.



PREPARING FOR A SECOND "FIRST DAY"

A strong curriculum alone wouldn't spell success for distance learning, though; staff also had to reset the classroom culture for an online setting. Impact staff prepared for several days, practicing instruction over Zoom and establishing schoolwide virtual practices. When students logged on for the first time on April 27, teachers treated it as a second "first day" of school, creating classroom norms and practicing virtual habits, such as turning the mute button on and off and using the "raise hand" function. Impact staff also trained families and caregivers, offering a live webinar and walking child care providers who serve Impact students through the new systems and expectations.

"The first thing that I saw was a smile on my son Carlos' face—happy to see his teacher again," parent Dione Napoles-Loo said. "He said to me, 'Mom, you are doing a very good job, but I prefer my teacher.'"



BRINGING IN THE CHILD EXPERTS

Shortly after Impact moved to distance learning, leaders began to collect feedback from families and adjust delivery. Wickens and her team hosted weekly family meetings on Zoom and sent home surveys to continually learn what was and wasn't working. Early on, families asked for more to do than the paper packets. The instructional team began sending a weekly e-newsletter with science experiments, movement activities, and additional enrichment ideas. When several families requested more frequent mentor check-ins, Impact made it happen. And if distance learning continues into the fall, Impact plans to make some larger changes in response to families' feedback. Most notably, they will group all live instruction together into continuous blocks so students do not have to be online all day. Each student will be able to choose whether to participate in the morning block or the afternoon block based on their family's schedule.

"We see parents as the experts on their children, and ourselves as the experts on education—that's where the magic happens," Wickens said. "And

magic happened in this situation. We brought the model, and parents adapted it for what works for their families."

By the end of the school year, Impact saw an average daily attendance rate of 93%.

HAVING A BROADER IMPACT

According to Wickens, Impact's quick transformation and success was a product of both hard work and the flexibility its charter school status provides. "This is an interesting moment for charter schools," Wickens said. "Because we are more nimble and tend to attract people who want to innovate, we really do have a moment here to distinguish ourselves as rising to the challenge."

Recognizing that Impact could adapt and try out new strategies more easily than its district counterparts, Wickens was eager to share what they were learning to better serve students outside the Impact community. The network sent its weekly "Impact At Home" e-newsletter to local and national partners, and shared its initial packets with neighboring districts. The school leadership team participated in several webinars with education leaders focused on effective planning for the fall. And Impact made all of its instructional videos and learning materials available to the public. As a result, Impact leaders estimate hundreds of students who attend local district schools, and even more who attend out-of-state schools—and even schools outside the United States—used Impact materials this spring.

"I feel so proud that we helped out other schools," Naples-Loo said. "And I feel so proud we built this together. Impact always says we are a team, and we truly did this together."





PUTTING A PREMIUM ON ENGAGEMENT

EXCEL ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOLS

Founded

2003

Location

Four campuses in East Boston and Chelsea, Massachusetts

Grades Served

5–12

Students Enrolled

~1,400

Student Demographics

81% from low-income families¹⁵

12% English Language Learners¹⁶

21% students with disabilities¹⁷

Accolades

For six consecutive years, the network's eighth graders outperformed all 450 Massachusetts public district and charter schools on the state exam.¹⁸

Noteworthy Facts

Before schools closed, 80% of Excel's special education students were enrolled in full-inclusion programs alongside their general education peers, versus the state average of 64%.¹⁹



Excel Academy has held students to the highest academic expectations since it opened its doors in 2003, and the numbers speak to the network's success. A study from Stanford's CREDO Institute found that the additional growth Excel students made over the course of a year relative to similar students in district schools was equivalent to receiving an additional 273 days of learning in math and 301 days of learning in English.¹³ Excel students are also four times more likely to graduate from college than their peers in comparative district schools.¹⁴ Moreover, Excel achieved these outcomes while providing an inclusive learning environment for the vast majority of its special education students, representing more than 20% of the student body.

But Excel doesn't just focus on the numbers; it sees 1,400 students in grades 5–12 as people. When schools across Massachusetts closed and the pandemic touched the communities Excel served, its leaders wrestled with how best to maintain high expectations while acknowledging students' humanity. The result was a model that prioritized student health and wellness, consistent communication, and constant opportunities to engage in learning, regardless of what may have happened the day or week before.



ONLINE LEARNING WITH EQUITY

As Excel's leaders considered what school should look like from a distance, they revisited their core values and reflected on what equity means during a pandemic. Through that process, they acknowledged that the online instruction they offered students could not fully replace what students would have received in person. Instead, they focused on getting students and staff through the spring in a healthy way that positioned them to face the uncertainty ahead in the 2020-21 school year.

First and foremost, all students needed access to rigorous academics. During the first two weeks, Excel delivered Chromebooks and work packets and helped families connect to the internet.

Teachers also immediately shifted services for students with learning disabilities online, providing real-time instruction and physical and occupational therapy. For all other learning, school leaders opted for asynchronous instruction to maximize flexibility and ensure that students did not feel discouraged if they couldn't log on at a particular time. Students received and completed assignments through Google Classroom every week. They could also talk to or videoconference with teachers during office hours every day, and often outside of office hours.

In addition, teachers adapted their content to easily allow students to reengage in academics if they stepped out for any reason. For example, the reading grade-level content teams swapped novels for short stories so students never fell so far behind that they would give up. Similarly, the network's grading policy focused on rewarding what students did rather than punishing them for what they did not do, though Excel required any student who did not complete a minimum amount of work to attend summer school.

"With every single policy and every single line in the sand that we drew, we thought about equity of access—to learning, to tech, to food," said Sarah Kantrowitz, director of student supports. "Our

students are humans, our teachers are humans, we don't have a playbook for this. And so the rules... that we held before may not apply here."

RELENTLESS OUTREACH

More than 80% of Excel students stayed engaged throughout the spring. A flexible academic program that always gave students opportunities to participate was one critical piece, Excel leaders said; relentless outreach was another.

As soon as school closed, Excel began checking in with students to see if they needed assistance. The student supports team established lunch delivery with their food vendor, worked with local internet providers for affordable access, solicited donations for a family fund, and strengthened their mental health referral process, among a host of other services.

The network largely built on the advisor-advisee relationships already in place to communicate with students and families. These required weekly check-ins. School leaders developed protocols to help staff ask students what they might need while respecting their privacy. Initial conversations focused on assessing student needs and determining which form of communication worked best. As the semester progressed, advisors attempted to support students and encourage academics without overwhelming families.

Excel also implemented a tracking system to support its outreach efforts. If a student turned in assignments independently or asked for help, they were marked green. Students who responded to phone calls and texts but did not turn in assignments appeared yellow. And students who did neither popped up in the tracker as red. This allowed network leaders to easily identify which students needed more follow-up and strategize on how best to reach them.



KEEPING WELLNESS AT THE FORE

All the while, Excel encouraged mental wellness for students and staff. “We know that students weren’t just not participating to take a vacation, but because of serious trauma,” said Elana Jones, counseling department chair.

The counseling team took the lead, creating a full webpage dedicated to wellness resources. Families could find various community health supports or ideas for integrating wellness into their daily lives. A new Instagram page, @Excel_Be_Well, sent followers regular words of encouragement and highlighted staff members’ self-care routines. Counselors also individually checked in with families, setting up ongoing therapy for students who needed it.

The counseling department plans to continue these mechanisms this fall and add a few more, including creating opportunities for students to process how COVID-19 has affected their lives. In addition, the team began working with advisors over the summer to establish relationships with students well before

the school doors opened again, either literally or virtually.

On the academic side, Excel wants to integrate more opportunities for real-time instruction and other interactions. School leaders know they will need to revisit their student expectations for 2020-21. But as Excel’s leadership considered all that happened through the spring, they felt the network guided students to the end of the year in a healthy way, and they want to approach the next year with the same level of compassion, care, and positivity.

As Megan Perry, dean of curriculum and instruction at Excel Academy East Boston, said, “We want them to feel safe and welcome—making sure they know that we are so excited to have them back, but also recognizing all of the challenges that come with it.”





APPENDIX A: DETAILED DATA TABLES

INDICATOR	CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE OF CHARTER OPERATORS
Resources provided by the operator	General curriculum resources provided	8.1%
	Specific curriculum resources provided	76.4%
	No curriculum resources provided	15.4%
Resource coverage	Curriculum resources provided for all grades	79.5%
	Curriculum resources provided for some grades	1.1%
	No curriculum resources provided	13.2%
	No information on grade-level resources provided	6.2%
Instruction from teachers	Operator expects teachers to engage with students on content	70.2%
	Operator expects teachers to engage with students in some grades on content	3.9%
	Teachers are not expected to engage with students	3.4%
	No information provided	22.5%
Real-time teaching	Real-time teaching expected for all grades	23.6%
	Real-time teaching expected for some grades	13.8%
	No real-time teaching expected	26.1%
	No information provided	36.5%
Real-time student engagement	Real-time student engagement expected for all grades	14.6%
	Real-time student engagement expected for some grades	10.4%
	No real-time student engagement expected	26.7%
	No information provided	48.3%
Students with disabilities	Operator provides information on support for students with disabilities	38.5%
	Operator does not provide information on support for students with disabilities	61.5%
Feedback on student work	Teachers provide feedback on work for all students	47.5%
	Teachers provide feedback on work for some grades	1.4%
	Teachers are not expected to provide feedback on student work	2.2%
	No information provided	48.9%
Formal grading flag	Grading is done for all students	35.1%
	Grading is done for some students	1.7%
	No grading expected	7.0%
	Information on grading not provided	56.2%



APPENDIX A: DETAILED DATA TABLES

INDICATOR	CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE OF CHARTER OPERATORS
Teacher check-ins	Check-ins expected (phone call, email, or virtual)	53.7%
	No expectations about check-ins	3.7%
	Information on check-ins not provided	42.7%
Attendance tracking	Attendance is taken	39.3%
	No expectations about attendance	8.1%
	Information not provided	52.5%
Instructional minutes recommended	Operator sets expectation for instructional minutes	36.5%
	Operator does not set expectations for instructional minutes	15.2%
	Information not provided	48.3%
Device distribution	Devices provided to all students	31.7%
	Devices provided to some students	14.3%
	Devices not provided to students	14.0%
	No mention of devices provided	39.9%
Hotspot access	Community hotspots provided	2.2%
	Home hotspots provided	8.1%
	Hotspots not provided	42.4%
	No mention of hotspots provided	47.2%



Appendix B—Methodology

Research staff selected a sample of 356 charter school leaders representing 7.6% of charter schools nationwide. The sample included 325 freestanding charter schools and 31 network operators (Charter Management Organizations [CMOs] or Education Management Organizations [EMOs]) to match the nationwide ratio of freestanding vs. network operators.

Researchers first searched for operators' publicly posted plans through operator websites and social media outlets. For operators whose website or social media page did not provide information on a COVID-19 response, researchers coded the indicator as "no mention" or "not provided." In instances where a CMO or EMO did not provide a network-wide response to COVID-19 school closures, researchers did not review individual school websites for additional information. Instead, researchers coded indicators using just the information provided at the operator level.

The research team used definitions and guidance provided by CRPE as of May 5, 2020. Since then, there have been updates to CRPE's indicators and coding, but these changes are not reflected in the charter school research.

METHODOLOGY				
INDICATOR	CATEGORY	MEASURE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Resources provided by operator	Curriculum	None General Specific	None = Operator provides no resources or expectations about curriculum, lessons, or activities.	None = Operator website says schools are on break or closed until XYZ date with no information about learning expectations.
			General = Operator provides a menu of learning resources (not sequential lessons). This could be a general list of resources or it could be a list organized by grade-level. This is essentially the most passive option.	General = Operator provides a list of homepage links to Khan Academy, the local library system, kidsreads.com, etc. Or operator provides paper or digital packet of optional activities (things to do) that are not part of a curriculum or sequence of learning.
			Specific = Operator provides (or expects schools to provide) curated/directive curriculum, placing each student in a specific position in a resource and prescribing their pacing through that resource, lessons/activities/units that are associated with a grade-level and a subject area (at least ELA and mathematics), or daily or weekly physical or downloadable packets that are distinct from the previous day or week's packet. These may be created by the operator, schools, teachers, or a third party.	Specific = Operator communications/plans explain that teachers are expected to provide students with assignments during the week, or operator makes work packets by grade level and subject available.
			Ratings are rounded up. So if any specific resources are available, the operator gets a "specific" rating. The next content indicator, "Resource coverage" provides an opportunity to indicate whether the "Resources provided by the operator" rating was based on providing resources to all grades (All) or if it was rounded up from only some grades (Partial).	An operator that delegates decision-making to its schools or teachers would receive a "specific" rating if it communicates expectations for teachers or schools to provide specific curricula



METHODOLOGY

INDICATOR	CATEGORY	MEASURE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Resource coverage	Curriculum	None All Partial	None = no grades covered. All = resources for all grades. Partial = resources for some grades (must explain what partial arrangement is in “coverage note” column).	Partial = If partial, explain in the “Explanation of partial coverage column.” For example, you might write “For high school only.”
Instruction from teachers	Instruction	None All Partial	None = no instruction. All = instruction for all grades. Partial = instruction for some grades (must explain what partial arrangement is in “Partial Explanation of Instruction” column). Operator expects teachers to engage with students on content, either via asynchronous learning (such as uploading prerecorded instructions on an app or video channel) or synchronous learning (such as providing “real time” instruction via Zoom). For an operator to be marked as a yes on instruction, there has to be an expectation communicated that teachers will be providing instruction or instructional resources, not just uploaded assignments or work packets.	Partial = If partial, explain in the Coverage Notes column. For example, you might write “For high school only.” Operator communications/plans explain that teachers will post video lessons or activities for their students (for example, posting on Schoology or other LMS or other platform (TV)—beyond just uploaded assignments. Operator communications/plans explain that teachers will provide “real-time” instruction for students over videoconference. Operator communications/plans explain that teachers will assign virtual instruction via online instructional platforms like Edgenuity, iReady, or Khan Academy. For a operator that delegates decision-making to its schools or teachers, it would receive an “all” rating if it communicates expectations for teachers or schools provide instruction. None = Teacher office hours or real-time video chat that isn’t attached to a lesson. Also not a teacher uploading weekly curricular assignments without accompanying instruction
Synchronous teaching flag	Instruction	None All Partial	None = no synchronous teaching. All = synchronous teaching for all grades. Partial = synchronous teaching for some grades (must explain what partial arrangement is in “coverage note” column). Operator expects some synchronous (“real time”) teaching. Offering office hours does not count as synchronous teaching.	Partial = If partial, explain in the Coverage Notes column. For example, you might write “For high school only.” Operator communications/plans explain that teachers will provide “real-time” instruction for students over videoconference. For an operator that delegates decision-making to its schools or teachers, even if some teachers are providing synchronous instruction, it would not receive an “all” or “partial” rating unless all teachers in the operator/grade level are asked to provide it.



METHODOLOGY

INDICATOR	CATEGORY	MEASURE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Synchronous student engagement flag	Instruction	None All Partial	None = no synchronous student engagement. All = synchronous student engagement for all grades. Partial = synchronous student engagement for some grades (must explain what partial arrangement is in “coverage note” column). Operator expects teacher to facilitate some student-to-student synchronous engagement.	Partial = If partial, explain in the Coverage Notes column. For example, you might write “For high school only.” Operator communications/plans explain that teachers will facilitate whole-group sessions among students in their class (such as by videoconference). Operator communications/plans explain that teachers are expected to assign collaborative group projects that require students to work together virtually, with or without the teacher present. For an operator that delegates decision-making to its schools or teachers, even if some students are experiencing synchronous engagement, it would not receive an “all” or “partial” rating unless all students in the operator/grade level are expected to receive it.
Students with disabilities	Instruction	Yes No	Yes = operator webpage specifically mentions how schools and/or the operator will support students with disabilities. No = operator webpage does not provide information mentioning how schools and/or the operator will support students with disabilities.	This indicator captures a range of possibilities. The lowest bar: An operator communicates that IEP meetings will be virtual or that specialists will contact families directly to talk about supports for student learning; others might have more elaborate resources or plans.
Feedback on student work	Progress monitoring	None All Partial	None = no feedback. All = feedback for all grades. Partial = feedback expected for some grades (must explain what partial arrangement is in “coverage note” column). Operator expects teachers to provide feedback on student work, monitor the academic progress of students, or issue grades. This measure captures multiple points on this continuum. The next indicator (formal grading flag) identifies the subset of operators that require some student work completed during the shutdowns to contribute to their final course grade.	Partial = If partial, explain in the Coverage Notes column. For example, you might write “For high school only.” Operator communications/plans explain that teachers should request that students submit work, provide students with feedback on their work, monitor student progress, and/or grade students’ work for contribution to the student’s grade. Note that the lowest bar for an affirmative answer (All or Partial) is students are asked to submit some of their work to their teachers. For an operator that delegates decision-making to its schools or teachers, even if some teachers are providing feedback on student work, it would not receive an “all” or “partial” rating unless all teachers in the operator/grade level are asked to provide it.



METHODOLOGY

INDICATOR	CATEGORY	MEASURE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Formal grading flag	Progress monitoring	None All Partial	None = no grading of student work. All = grading of student work for all grades (e.g., ELM, MS, HS). Partial = grading of student work expected for some grades (must explain what partial arrangement is in “coverage note” column). The formal grading flag identifies the subset of operators that require some student work completed during the shutdowns to contribute to their final course grade.	Partial = If partial, explain in the Coverage Notes column. For example, you might write “For high school only.” Operator communications/plans explain that teachers will be recording grades on student work. Pass/Fail and Extra Credit Only count as a formal grade. None = Operator communications/plans mentions that teachers may be grading or scoring assignments but that these scores won’t contribute to the final course grade
Teacher Check In	Progress monitoring	Yes No	Yes = Operator communicates an expectation that teachers will check in with students, via phone call, email or virtual platform. No = No expectations communicated for teachers to check in with students. This indicator captures whether teachers are maintaining contact and connection with students outside of instruction and regular class settings.	Operator communicates that teachers will be calling students individually to check in. Operator communicates that teachers will hold office hours if students or families have questions. Advisors hold advisory class. Teachers hold morning meetings or weekly wellness meetings.
Operator delegates distance learning	Centralization	Yes No	Yes = Operator is not adopting an operator-wide remote learning plan but is requiring individual schools or teachers to develop their own remote learning plans. No = District is adopting a district-wide remote learning plan.	Operator provides expectations for all schools, and schools are asked to design their own remote learning plan. Operator refers parents to their school’s website or teachers’ websites to learn more about their remote learning plan. Operator provides expectations for teachers to follow, which may include a range of options for them to choose from.
Attendance tracking	Learning Time	Yes No	Yes = Operator communicates a process for tracking student attendance. No = Operator does not communicate a process for tracking student attendance.	Operator communicates some process for capturing student attendance. Examples could be: students are asked to log in each day to a virtual platform, students are asked to download instruction or assignments each day via an app like Canvas, students are asked to submit a response to a “question of the day,” or teachers record attendance via phone calls home.
Instructional minutes recommended	Learning Time	Yes No	Yes = Operator recommends or requires a certain amount of instructional minutes each day or week. No = Operator does not recommend or require instructional minutes.	Operator recommends students spend a maximum of 90 minutes a day on math and ELA activities.



METHODOLOGY

INDICATOR	CATEGORY	MEASURE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Device distribution	Technology	None All Partial	None = no devices provided, or operator hasn't started providing devices yet. All = devices provided for all students. Partial = devices provided for some grades, or one per family, etc. (must explain what partial arrangement is in "coverage note" column). Operator provides technology devices (laptops, tablets) to students.	Partial = If partial, explain in the Coverage Notes column. For example, you might write "For high school only" or "One per family, not each student." Partial also applies if the operator is in process of providing devices, but they have not been provided to all grade levels yet.
Hotspot access	Technology	Community Home Both Home Both	Community-based = hotspots provided to students at school or community-based sites. Home-based= mobile or personalized hotspots provided for some grades or student groups. Both= both provided.	Community-based: operator has established amplified WiFi outside school parking lots, or is stationing buses equipped with WiFi in communities. Home-based: operator provides phones equipped with WiFi or pays for parents to establish mobile hotspots on their personal phones.



FOOTNOTES

- 1 responses to COVID-19 school closures. Seattle, Washington. <https://www.crpe.org/current-research/covid-19-school-closures>
- 2 to-face credit recovery for at-risk urban students. *Journal of Research on Education Effectiveness*. 10(2), 272–296. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19345747.2016.1168500?journalCode=uree20>; Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2015). *Online charter school study*. Stanford University. https://credo.standard.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481f/online_charter_study_final.pdf
- 3 *What policymakers need to know: Closing the digital divide*. Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2020-06/napcs_digital_divide_rd6.pdf
- 4 <https://parents-together.org/parentstogether-survey-reveals-remote-learning-is-failing-our-most-vulnerable-students/>
- 5 We did not select the schools profiled from the sample whose school plans we analyzed.
- 6
- 7 Amana Academy School. <https://gaawards.gosa.ga.gov/analytics/saw.dll?dashboard>
- 8 include infants and toddlers, which account for 150 to 200 additional students at a given time. Email correspondence with Ashley Simpson Baird, July 20, 2020.
- 9 Based on FARMS data. Email correspondence with Ashley Simpson Baird, July 20, 2020.
- 10 <https://cpcsb.egnetye.com/dl/i7WXCwOqck/>
- 11 Report Card Enrollment 2019-20 School Year. <https://data.wa.gov/Education/Report-Card-Enrollment-2019-20-School-Year/qtd3-scqa>
- 12 Impact Public Schools. “Results.” Available <http://www.impactps.org/results>
- 13 Excel Academy Charter School. *Impact*. Retrieved from <https://www.excelacademy.org/impact/>
- 15 Data from 2017–18 used due to changes in the state’s definition of economically disadvantaged. The new 2018–19 definition relies on enrollment in benefits programs to which members of the communities that Excel serves disproportionately lack access. *Excel Academy Charter Schools Annual Report 2017–2018*. <http://4di94dzfh8c2ap9kf354mnan-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Excel-Annual-Report.pdf>; *Excel Academy Charter Schools Annual Report 2017–2018*. http://4di94dzfh8c2ap9kf354mnan-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018-2019-Annual-Report_Final_8-1-2019.pdf
- 16 Data from 2018–19. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Excel Academy Charter School District Profile. <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/ssdr/default.aspx?orgcode=04100205&orgtypecode=6&=04100205&>
- 17 Data from 2018–19. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Excel Academy Charter School District Profile. <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/ssdr/default.aspx?orgcode=04100205&orgtypecode=6&=04100205&>
- 18 Excel Academy Charter. Who we are—2019. <https://www.excelacademy.org/about-us-2019/>
- 19 Based on 2017–18 data. Solomont, E. B. (2020). Inclusion in Action. *Education Next*. <https://www.educationnext.org/inclusion-action-expectations-for-all-excel-academy-boston/>