

EQUITY AND JUSTICE ALERT

Advocacy, Research and Policy Analysis from the Partnership for LA Schools



Listening to Learn:

What Los Angeles families say they need during distance learning

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, students' families and home environments play an even bigger role in their education. With most school campuses closed, it now falls on families to provide many of the supports for learning that were previously provided by the school site. Even before the pandemic, more than one in three California households—over 3.8 million families (37%)—did not earn sufficient income to meet basic needs,^[1] and low-income communities of color have long been underserved by our education system. With the current pandemic hitting low-income communities and communities of color the hardest,^[2] the challenges facing students and families have only increased. Now more than ever, it is essential that we listen to those who are most impacted, so that we can support students, teachers and schools in providing quality educational opportunities during the pandemic.

Towards this end, the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (Partnership) collaborated with researchers from the University of Southern California (USC) on a study of more than 1,100 Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified) families whose children attend historically under-resourced public schools within the Partnership network. Our aim was to understand the challenges of distance education for low-income Black and Latinx families during the spring and summer of 2020, and to identify strategies that can help improve the distance learning experience this fall based on what they shared with us. By sharing these data, we hope that the broader Los Angeles and education communities can benefit from what we have learned and help us meet the needs of the communities we serve and beyond.

About the Research Study

- Methodology: Random stratified sampling of families with children enrolled in 19 LA Unified K-12 schools managed by the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (see demographics below)
 - Sample was stratified by neighborhood (South LA, Watts, Boyle Heights) and grade level (ES, MS, HS)
 - Margin of error: 3% or less for a 95% confidence interval
- Survey format: Responses were obtained via telephone surveys (with at least two attempts made before replacing the prospective participant with another participant) administered by Partnership outreach team in English and Spanish to parents or legal guardians (18+ years old)
- Timeframe: July 8, 2020 – July 29, 2020
- Response: 1,181 completed surveys; 3,473 calls made; response rate: 34%

About the USC Research Team

The USC research team was led by Prof. Hernan Galperin from the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Prof. Stephen Aguilar from the USC Rossier School of Education, with research assistance from graduate students Clare Baek and Eduardo Gonzalez.



About the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools is an independent non-profit that has worked with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified) since 2007 to manage and support historically under-resourced traditional public schools. The Partnership manages 19 LA Unified primary and secondary schools serving 14,200 students in the Los Angeles communities of Boyle Heights, South Los Angeles and Watts. As an “in-district partner” to LA Unified, the Partnership is uniquely positioned to work within the traditional public school system to support teachers and other school staff to remove barriers to enable academic success for all students. Unlike charters, which operate with processes and policies that are separate from the district, we adhere to all collective bargaining agreements and operate under the same conditions as district schools.

Student Demographics:

- Total population: 14,200
- Race: Latinx (89%); Black (9%)
- English Learners: 24%
- Free or Reduced Price Lunch: 96%
- Students with Disabilities: 14%

Findings

1. Lives and livelihoods are at risk: Even as families struggle with dramatic changes to schooling, they are also grappling with more fundamental challenges since the start of the pandemic.

- 77% of families have experienced loss of income
- 72% have experienced food insecurity
- 27% have experienced health challenges
- 28% have experienced housing insecurity

2. Families are making investments to support distance learning: Since March, about 1 in 3 families have purchased new devices or services to support distance learning.

- 30% of families purchased new devices or services for distance learning
- Of these 30%:
 - ◆ 77% contracted internet service (fixed or mobile)
 - ◆ 17% bought a laptop
 - ◆ 7% bought a tablet
 - ◆ 6% bought a cellphone
 - ◆ 15% bought other equipment

(Note: multiple answers are possible)

3. Initiatives to provide internet access remain vital: While 3 out of 4 families have home broadband internet service, a quarter do not. This underlines the importance of LA Unified’s hotspot initiative, along with other efforts to close the digital divide and support distance learning.

- 75% of families have fixed internet access (DSL, cable) at home
- 17% of families report having no internet at home
- 8% of families have mobile internet only

4. Students use a range of devices for distance learning: Thanks in large part to recent efforts by LA Unified, about 9 out of 10 families report that their students are using a computer (laptop, desktop or Chromebook) for distance learning. However, some families continue to lack adequate devices, or have devices that are shared among several family members. Many students use smartphones, which may prevent students from fully engaging in distance learning activities optimized for other devices.

- 88% use a computer (laptop/Chromebook/desktop)
 - ◆ Of these, 18% report that computers are shared with other family members
- 26% use a cellphone (including 41% of high schoolers)

- 15% use a tablet (including 29% of elementary students)
 - 8% use a TV or gaming device
- (Note: multiple answers are possible)

5. Students often lack quiet space for distance learning: Lack of adequate space at home may negatively impact engagement, and ultimately, academic performance.

- 14% of families report students “never” have a space free of noise or distraction for distance learning
- 23% of families report students only “sometimes” have a space free of noise or distraction for distance learning

6. Many parents are not familiar with distance learning technology: Parents and guardians may struggle to help students with the technological needs that arise with distance learning due to limited experience using computers and digital education platforms.

- 75% of parents/guardians do not use computers on a regular basis
- 47% of parents/guardians have never visited the school’s digital education platforms (e.g. Schoology, Google Classroom)

7. Students rely on siblings for support: Students are turning to siblings and other family members for support with distance learning activities. Students ask the following individuals for help with schoolwork:

- 42% siblings
- 40% parents & guardians
- 28% teachers
- 11% other family members
- 6% classmates
- 3% other school staff

(Note: multiple answers are possible)

8. Students need consistent support and motivation to complete assignments: Student motivation and deficits in technology at home are major barriers to effective distance learning. Families also voice concerns about lack of school support for their children. Parents cite the following causes for students not completing schoolwork:

- 53% cite issues of motivation
- 39% cite issues of school support
- 29% cite deficits in internet access
- 22% cite lack of appropriate device

(Note: multiple answers are possible)

9. Students are more engaged when they have a computer and reliable Internet access: Parents who report their children were always engaged with school activities during distance learning:

- 57% for families with computer at home vs. 43% for those without a computer
- 57% for families with fixed internet access (DSL, cable) vs. 49% for those without access

10. When looking ahead to the 2020-21 school year, families asked for more support: Parents described the following areas as “very important” for schools to increase in the fall:

- 80% said direct contact between school and parents or guardians
- 80% said feedback on student work
- 77% said help with internet access and devices
- 76% said live instruction

Recommendations

As an organization dedicated to serving low-income communities of color in Boyle Heights, South LA and Watts, we are responding to these data by supporting teachers and other school staff in removing barriers that stand in the way of students getting the education they deserve. The LA Unified School District has also responded, mandating that all schools offer live instruction on a daily basis, purchasing tens of thousands of laptops, tablets, and hotspots, and providing families with clear schedules that include the use of multiple digital platforms to allow for frequent two-way communication between teachers and families. In addition to the school system, we know that the families we serve are also served by the city, the state, the federal government, and myriad other partners, so we are calling for collective action to support students and families.

1. **Invest in resource equity:** Low-income Black and Latinx communities have been hit hardest by both COVID-19 and the digital divide. We must invest more resources in communities that have historically been neglected.
 - a. **Federal:** Pass legislation to unlock funding for schools and community services that are targeted to low-income communities of color. Support and endorse the Heroes Act (proposed federal stimulus legislation).
 - b. **State:** Strengthen equitable investments in the students with the greatest unmet needs. Support and endorse California's Proposition 15 (Schools & Communities First), Proposition 16 (which would remove the ban on affirmative action) and AB 1835 (which would help ensure supplemental & concentration funding will be spent on targeted students).
 - c. **County & City:** Allocate and redirect county and city resources (including federal COVID-19 relief funding) to increase support for families and students in low-income communities of and communities of color.
 - d. **District:** Strengthen equitable funding by allocating all supplemental & concentration funding through the [Student Equity Needs Index](#).
 - e. **School:** Create systems to gather data from students and families about barriers that get in the way of learning and connect those in need to partners and agencies who can help.

2. **Bridge the digital divide:** Despite the efforts of LA Unified and the Partnership to provide students with devices and internet connectivity, not all families have equal access to technology.
 - a. **Federal:** Expand the [E-Rate Program](#) to allow for funding to support home broadband connections for K-12 students and their families. Create an emergency broadband subsidy for K-12 families in financial distress, as included in the Heroes Act.
 - b. **State:** Require all internet providers to market and offer affordable high-speed internet plans on a permanent basis with minimum speed requirements and no data caps to all K-12 families who qualify for free and reduced price lunch. Increase the availability of funding from the California Public Utilities Commission's California Advanced Services Fund (CASF) for local school districts.
 - c. **County & City:** Leverage rights-of-way and other county and city assets to promote new investments from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in underserved communities. Pre-qualify families eligible for free and reduced price lunch for access to low-cost broadband service. Negotiate and contract with ISPs and computer companies on behalf of families. For example, the [City of Chicago is sponsoring service](#) for families without internet. Utilize public facilities including parks and parking lots as Wi-Fi hotspots for students who lack reliable access at home. Invest in digital literacy initiatives for families.
 - d. **District & School:** Create systems to continuously gather information from students and families on technology needs and utilize district, city and partner resources to address them.

3. Partner with families: It is vital that we transform family engagement to truly partner with families and engage in two-way communication that helps us understand and tailor support for students.
 - a. State: Require that districts' Learning Continuity & Attendance Plans detail new approaches to family engagement and gather data about the extent of two-way communication with families.
 - b. District: Create conditions where educators have the time and tools needed to work in partnership with families and engage in regular two-way conversations about needs, goals and supports.
 - c. School: Engage every family in two-way conversation about needs, goals and supports for their student. For example, make [welcome phone calls](#) and discuss [future goals with students and families](#) as part of the start of school.

4. Ensure high-quality instruction that is responsive to students' needs: It is vital that we adapt instruction to the diverse needs and circumstances of our students, as highlighted by the findings of this survey.
 - a. State: Require that districts' Learning Continuity & Attendance Plans detail how instruction and supports will be differentiated to meet the needs of targeted student populations.
 - b. District: Create conditions where educators have the time and tools needed to adapt instruction to the particular needs of their students.
 - c. School: Utilize collaborative planning and professional learning time to reflect on student needs, access tools and resources, and plan for instruction that meets the particular needs of students. For example, the Partnership has created an online [Educator Hub](#) with resources to guide schools, including "[3 Essentials for Social-Emotional Learning](#)".

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[1] "[The Real Cost Measure in California 2019](#)." United Ways of California, 2019.

[2] "[How Race, Class and Place Fuel a Pandemic](#)," Advancement Project California, 2020.