



BEST PRACTICES FOR SCHOOL CONTINUITY DURING COVID-19

How Bronx Public Charter Schools Supported their Students, Families, Educators and Communities Amidst a Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

On March 15, 2020, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio made the extraordinary decision to shut down City schools as the COVID-19 pandemic worsened¹. That moment immediately reshaped learning for 1.1 million students, and in the days that followed, educators were forced to reinvent decades of teacher practice to respond to this unprecedented moment. New York City would be thrust into uncharted educational territory. In the weeks ahead, New York City would soon become the international epicenter of COVID-19.

Schools worked with unprecedented speed to rapidly convert into remote learning hubs. Overnight, teachers were asked to do things they had never previously done, administrators had to transform themselves into technology experts, and school leaders had to reinvent their classrooms virtually – all while the students they served faced a severe digital divide. For New York City, the speed of the pandemic and positive case growth was seemingly matched only by the speed with which educators had to adapt in order to prevent loss of learning.

However, despite these challenges, in the dark moment in New York City history that has been the COVID-19 crisis, public charter schools in the Bronx have been a historic bright spot. At our various networks of open-enrollment charter schools in the Bronx, we educate hundreds of students through rigorous curriculums and unique approaches. More than a quarter of residents live in poverty². The Bronx leads the city, with over 52% of those in poverty living in extreme poverty, compared to less than 7% on Staten Island and less than 4% in Queens³. Despite historic disparities and inequality, our students thrive on a classroom model that emphasizes a highly-structured setting.

¹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/151-20/new-york-city-close-all-school-buildings-transition-remote-learning>

² <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/bronxcountybronxboroughnewyork>

³ <https://furmancenter.org/thestoop/entry/focus-on-poverty>

Recreating any curriculum virtually is a Herculean task. But surprisingly, many of our schools were able to provide eight hours per day or more of teaching, and maintain many of our offerings like dance, arts, and STEM classes. It's taken quality planning and laser-like execution, as well as an active willingness to learn from missteps and grow from mistakes. Schools like ours developed quality systems for remote learning – ones that can be scaled and adopted in this moment of national need.

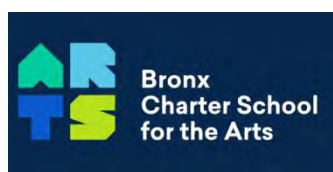
As the rest of the country confronts COVID-19, it is clearer than ever that remote learning will remain in America for the foreseeable future. Districts are struggling to put devices in children's hands; policymakers are facing obstacles in devising plans that deliver public schooling without jeopardizing public health. Parents are deeply concerned about their children's educational growth.

But to ensure our students thrive in this new environment, it's essential that remote learning be viewed not as a short-term obstacle, but a new foray into pedagogy that can enhance student learning in the long-term. The stakes have also never been higher. One recent study by NWEA entitled "The COVID-19 Slide: What Summer Learning Loss Can Tell Us About the Potential Impact of School Closures on Student Academic Achievement," noted:

"Preliminary COVID-19 slide estimates suggest students will return in fall 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. However, in mathematics, students are likely to show much smaller learning gains, returning with less than 50% of the learning gains and in some grades, nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions."

If we as a country do not get remote learning right, the impacts could reverberate for generations to come.

Our goal with this document is very simple: to share what we've learned. We have gleaned an incredible amount of information about how to serve families remotely in an exceptionally short period of time. We now want to share tenets of that learning experience with those who might need it – a parent who is concerned about the future, a teacher preparing for the fall, a district thinking through complex logistics, and anyone who wants to learn more about how we collectively, as a society, can serve children in this time of incredible need. Therefore, this sketch of best practices outlines what we've learned, dos and don'ts, and instructional tips for any school leader, teacher, district, or parent who needs support with virtual instruction.



PRE-COVID-19 SUCCESS OF BRONX CHARTERS

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the story of public charter schools in the Bronx was a story of New York City children beating the odds. Many public charter schools in the Bronx had delivered dramatic student success – and for those who needed it most. Some schools outperformed affluent suburbs like Scarsdale and Rye, delivering a world-class education for students who are too often counted out.

- According to New York State 2019 test scores, in grades 3-8, public charter schools in the Bronx outperformed the state by 12 and nearly 15 percentage points in ELA and Math respectively.

Combined 3-8 Scores	2019 results	
	ELA	Math
Bronx Charters	57.36%	61.72%
Schools Statewide	45.36%	46.73%

- The proficiency gap has also closed, with Black and Latinx Bronx public charter school students outperforming White students across New York State.

Combined 3-8 Scores	2019 results	
	ELA	Math
Bronx Black Charter Students	64.10%	68.32%
Statewide White Students	51.22%	55.50%

Combined 3-8 Scores	2019 results	
	ELA	Math
Bronx Latino Charter Students	52.43%	55.75%
Statewide White Students	51.22%	55.50%

- For second language learners and Students with Disabilities, Bronx Charters continue to see strides compared to schools across New York State.

Performance Among ELL Students in Bronx Charter Schools vs. ELL Students Statewide

Combined 3-8 Scores	2019 results	
	ELA	Math
Bronx Charters	19.49%	29.02%
Schools Statewide	8.70%	16.96%

Performance Among Students with Disabilities in Bronx Charter Schools vs. Students with Disabilities Statewide

Combined 3-8 Scores	2019 results	
	ELA	Math
Bronx Charters	28.41%	34.28%
Schools Statewide	13.91%	16.21%

FACE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Virtual learning is only possible if each child has a device and connectivity. Across New York City, nearly a third of households did not have a broadband internet connection at home prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. A full 1.5 million New Yorkers have neither a mobile connection nor home broadband connection at all.⁴ In New York City, households that lack any internet access are most prevalent in neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty.⁵

In the Bronx alone, 38% of all households lacked high-speed internet.⁶ It was clear that COVID-19 would disproportionately impact our families. Facing incredible economic uncertainty and insecurity, the virus put a giant spotlight on a socio-economic disparity that has long plagued the Bronx: the digital divide.



Launch an Inventory of Technological Tools

For schools transitioning to remote learning, having an inventory and a physical count of what tools parents had and where gaps existed was the first step to ensuring that online learning was successful for our charter schools in the Bronx, allowing for the distribution of thousands of devices at the start of the pandemic. For many of our schools, that work started with surveying parents. While some might view an online poll as the most efficient and expeditious way of getting that data, there are families that

⁴ <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/new-yorks-new-broadband-plan-hopes-to-finally-address-the-digital-divide>

⁵ <https://www.ccnynyork.org/blog/new-york-citys-digital-divide-500000-nyc-households-have-no-internet-access-when-it-is-more-important-than-ever-before/>

⁶ <https://statescoop.com/new-york-city-asks-isps-technology-companies-to-help-close-digital-divide/>

don't have internet access or the technology to fill out such a survey. As a result, one-on-one communication with families is important for any school conducting a tech inventory, since it offers nuance about technological gaps that schools or teachers may not be able to see through an online poll.

IT Maintenance

With remote learning becoming a nationwide reality for the foreseeable future, technological breakdowns are bound to happen. So, how do we mitigate communication or logistical challenges that could arise?

First, teachers should focus on what they do best: teaching. That means school leaders and districts should do everything possible to ease the technological burden on educators. Consequently, it's important to create and have a single point of contact for any IT or technological maintenance issue that could arise among families.

Whether adding new staff or repurposing existing team members to fill this role, it is vital to keep dedicated staff focused on providing everyone in a school community 24/7 access to IT help.

Test Software

If there is a single thing to remember in the transition to live remote instruction, it's that every educator must test software *before* it's implemented. Otherwise, the children we serve will test it for us – and they will no doubt use their preternatural technological savvy to discover and expose holes in the systems we design. Put simply, always test the software among staff before it's deployed to children and consider every possible glitch and or potential mishap to prevent any distractions from instruction.

ADAPT INSTRUCTION

As the COVID-19 crisis continues, every teacher undoubtedly misses their children. It is impossible to replace the feeling of seeing a smile on a child's face when a concept is mastered. But in 2020, we must do what we always do: adapt to circumstances that are beyond our control.

The fact is that having a device is just the start. A device and connectivity are *tools* to access knowledge and learning – not the knowledge itself. As we all know, the real work is the instruction itself in the classroom.

Nothing can fully replace in-person instruction. But as our experience in the Bronx shows, we can come close to replicating it, and we can actually pinpoint many organizational upsides from this remote experience that will be in our pedagogical arsenal for years to come. From creative organization of human capital, to rethinking the interactivity of lessons, to incentivizing attendance, there are many upsides that can be learned virtually and utilized in the future.

Balance Full-Grade Classes and Small-Group Instruction

Depending on your platform – Google Classroom, Zoom, or otherwise – we recommend schools begin daily instruction with a large class using lecture-style instruction across an entire grade of students, with the most experienced teacher as the lead instructor. The class can then break into smaller group teaching in virtual side rooms to drill down on the content. Just as schools might structure whole-class instruction followed by small-group learning if schools were in-person, it can indeed be replicated well virtually.

If schools were in person, several teachers might be giving the same lesson, at the same time, in siloed rooms. But not so in virtual classrooms, in which all eyes are on a single teacher. By having the most experienced teacher in a given subject deliver the

large-group lesson, all students and less experienced teachers gain access to the most effective educator for a given subject.

That sheer exposure to quality teaching can, in fact, improve instruction among all of a grade's educators and offer seamless best practice-sharing. If a teacher instructs a class or session in a way that resonates with students, it also can immediately be adopted by other teachers, added to a curriculum, and integrated into instruction in the long term. The virtual classroom can indeed be an opportunity for teachers to learn from each other through osmosis, and to crowd-source the best pedagogical techniques to deliver real-time professional development. It can help make everyone better.

Use Incentives and Reward Success

In the virtual classroom, incentives and rewards matter. And there is an app for that: Class Dojo is a program that describes itself as "a school communication platform that teachers, students, and families use every day to build close-knit communities by sharing what's being learned in the

THE BRONX EXCELLENCE "BOBCAT BOOK CORNER"

As COVID-19 struck New York City, Bronx Excellence – a high performing charter school network of several schools throughout the Bronx – sought new ways to help its community feel united despite virtual learning. Bronx Excellence knew that books have the power to bring people together while helping them grasp new content, so it launched its "Bobcat Book Corner" series.

Through that "Bobcat Book Corner" series, Bronx Excellence provides a hand-selected group of its teachers and faculty with a carefully orchestrated guide on how they could film themselves at home reading their favorite childhood story aloud. Once the videos are completed, each day of the school week, a new read aloud video is posted across all social media platforms – YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter – and shared among the school community. The link to the YouTube channel is also provided in Bronx Excellence's newsletters, so that distribution is wide. The response to this series has been overwhelmingly positive and has helped students and their families feel more connected to their teachers and staff during this challenging time, while also encouraging reading and community.

classroom home through photos, videos, and messages."⁷ One of its features allows teachers to use a point system to reward student work. As points are accumulated, they can be “cashed in” for a prize of the teacher’s choosing. That incentive and reward system can help align online student behavior, drive higher attendance, and create structure in what could otherwise be an amorphous virtual classroom.



Scaling Best Practices and Saving Your Best Lessons

No one knows how long remote learning will be our reality. It could be with us for years to come. That means recording and saving our best lessons now could save teachers' time and improve instruction later. Saving and

recording lessons as they happen helps solve for challenging scenarios that we can anticipate – but also ones that we can't.

For those schools that have highly structured curriculum or develop their own curriculum, there may be a technique that a lead teacher employs that draws a positive student response in a virtual classroom. Every school should strive to immediately save that technique and integrate it into their curriculum, so it can enhance learning and the curriculum in perpetuity.

What's more, having a digital copy of every lesson is important to support those students who may be chronically absent during the COVID-19 crisis. Having every lesson available helps ensure students have the tools to catch up when they need it most.

⁷ <https://www.classdojo.com/about/>

Create a Feedback Loop

Having a feedback loop, in which observations are celebrated and growth-oriented, is important for both long-term instructional success and developing a healthy virtual school culture. One benefit to virtual classes is that they allow instructional coaches to seamlessly dip in and out of online classrooms. One minute they can be in 3rd grade math, and the next they can drop into 11th grade history – all through their laptop from their kitchen table. That enables instructional coaches and master teachers to witness lessons more frequently. Teachers can get feedback electronically and in real-time, improving instruction almost immediately. Constructive feedback matters.

Stick to What Works

Stick to what you know works. That's especially true if schools feel like they have strong, rigorous instructional materials. Use the workbooks and online subscriptions that were already in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and build a virtual learning plan and online curriculum around these materials. When students are already familiar with and accustomed to the tools, they will know what to expect. Sometimes during times of change, it can be helpful to stick to some points of familiarity to help make a transition easier.

Don't Be Afraid to Innovate

While it's important to stick to things that your scholars already know and have success with, new remote circumstances call for new opportunities. That can include:

- **New Forms of Communication:** At least one Bronx public charter school launched a new regular newsletter that offered daily reading activities,

foundational mathematical and literacy skills, and the development of co-curricular assignments centered on a weekly theme.

These assignments often ask scholars to make creative choices, problem solve, and be exposed to educational content in a new way.

- **New Virtual Tools and Field Trips:** The availability of online tools for virtual fieldtrips is breathtaking. Many virtual tools have previously gone underutilized. But the fact is that even if your city or state is on a COVID-related lockdown, your classroom can travel around the world– from World Heritage Sites to major landmarks— in order to enhance the virtual academic experience. Trying new things will help engage your students.

Utilize the Assets of Your Entire Local Community

An Education Week survey of teachers nationwide showed that compared to engagement levels prior to the school closures, student engagement is much lower virtually than it is in-person.⁸ How can we solve for that?

One way is to bring people in your local community – celebrities, athletes, TV personalities, newscasters, outside experts, etc. – into your virtual classroom. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people want to help their communities. Now, virtual tools are

CLASSICAL CHARTER'S REMOTE LEARNING SERIES

As schools moved to an entirely remote environment, educators had to think of ways to keep students engaged by various creative means.

At Classical Charter Schools, teachers invited high-profile guests to speak to students and expose them to new opportunities and potential career paths.

School leaders invited guests like Harlem Globetrotter Herbert “Flight Time” Lang, Navy Blue Angel pilot Scott Moyer, and a local newscaster for interviews conducted over Zoom.

Zoom and virtual classrooms make it easier than ever to bring people into your classroom, and the new initiative had the benefit of engaging students, driving up attendance, and enhancing the curricula. As a result, schools may want to consider what connections they may have to alumni or within their community, and use those special guests as a way to drive student engagement.

⁸ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/27/survey-tracker-k-12-coronavirus-response.html>

making it easier than ever for someone – anywhere in the world – to visit a classroom, give a lecture, and speak to students. Bringing in local subject-matter experts from your community, local celebrities, or even athletes can boost engagement, increase attendance, and enhance virtual academic outcomes.

ZETA CHARTER SCHOOL'S VIRTUAL MUSIC LESSONS

In providing remote learning, how do you translate courses that require a more personal touch, such as the arts and music?

Zeta Charter Schools faced this exact issue and worked with New York Philharmonic violinist Kuan Cheng Lu to [provide groundbreaking virtual violin lessons for dozens of elementary students.](#)

After showcasing two pieces, the award-winning musician then walked the students through personalized instruction.

Zeta proves that remote learning has opened up a range of possibilities to teach children the arts and ensures they don't lose their hard-earned skills while learning from home.

Embrace the Arts and Music

In a virtual classroom, the arts are perhaps more important than ever. The arts and music can provide critical enrichment that will enhance all other academic learning. Dance can give students the exercise they desperately need. Music can enliven the academic schedule. Drawing and painting can bring out the innate creativity that exists in all of our kids. Put simply, the arts and music help provide critical differentiation for a day of remote learning and prevent learning from becoming monotonous.

Prepare for a "New Normal"

No one knows what a new educational normal will look like in the long-term, and schools may not necessarily simply go back to "the way things were" prior to the pandemic. Rather, going

forward, when America eventually overcomes this pandemic, students will no longer be limited to receiving their education in a physical classroom. In a post-COVID-19 world, students will have access to their work and lessons 24/7 via the cloud, allowing them to catch up or reference other materials whenever needed. They'll have access to lessons, instructional materials, and more via their devices. They'll be able to learn

and master content outside the physical confines of a classroom. And if students are sick for a day or absent for a longer time, they may no longer risk missing lessons.

That puts a premium on saving work and thinking ahead. We need to have a strategic attitudinal shift. The more we as educators adapt to this experience now, the more we master remote teaching, and the more we think through how to modernize our instructional practices, the more successful we'll be in a post-COVID-19 world when virtual instruction is likely to become permanently embedded into the American educational toolkit. We should be thinking about how to adapt our classrooms today – *for tomorrow*.

THIS FALL, TEACHERS WILL BE ON THE FRONT LINES

The following op-ed was written by Comp Sci High Founding Principal David Noah, appearing on Chalkbeat.com on May 26, 2020

Every May, the nation celebrates Teacher Appreciation Week – a week that had particular meaning this year, in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a high school principal in the Bronx, adapting to this new age of virtual learning, I spent most of the week figuring out how to show my appreciation for these heroes: sending Uber Eats codes, cute videos, and inspiring quotations to teachers at my school. I also began thinking deeply about the daily experience of my teachers and their peers across the country – how important they were before COVID, and what the virus means for educators going forward.

If you know any teachers, you know they miss face-to-face instruction. That personal connection — teaching, guiding, and connecting with our students — is the reason why many of us became educators in the first place. The shift to remote schooling has been difficult and emotionally painful. I am guilty of driving around the Bronx to deliver Chromebook chargers to students just to regain a sliver of personal connection with my students, even if it means I'm only "connecting" with their building's lobby.

That's why so many of us desperately want to return to our schools and to some version of normalcy. But that idea of normalcy — of going back to the way things were — is not just fantasy. It's dangerous. For many teachers and principals, the school year ahead will be grim. Outside of school buildings, the reopening of schools may signal progress. But for teachers, it will be the beginning of an even more difficult stage of this crisis.

Daily life in a school is communal and intimate — that's why the virus spreads so fast in schools, even though children are less likely to get seriously ill from COVID. "Reopening" doesn't just mean moving some desks apart. A responsible reopening will mean rethinking every detail from arrival to dismissal. What do we do if a kid needs a pen? How do we safely pass out and collect papers? Do we grade with gloves and teach with masks? Can students work in groups? How do we lean over to check a student's work from six feet away? Will teachers meet together, at the risk of the virus spreading among our entire school?

If we're not thinking about those questions, then we're not taking the proper precautions. And if we're not taking the proper precautions, then teaching becomes a physically dangerous profession. That means quality teachers could leave it altogether. The simple reality is that creating social distance in schools is not like drawing circles in the grass in Domino Park to keep sunbathers apart. It requires a top-to-bottom reinvention of every academic and social situation in a school.

And without every district across the country thinking critically about these steps, it's possible that there will be many more schools that mourn the death of an educator next year. When that moment comes, every article we've read about nurses and doctors will be written again about teachers — about the fear, mental anguish, disillusionment, sickness, and struggle that will suddenly become a part of their daily jobs.

There are reasons to be hopeful. I know many great principals here in New York and across the country who are already planning, researching, sourcing masks, consulting virologists, and radically rethinking schedules and teaching methods.

But the question is whether entire school systems are truly ready for what will be a dramatic and difficult transition. And if many bureaucratic systems haven't even mastered Zoom yet, it's hard to see them providing answers to these very individualized, complicated, situational questions about our schools. And as school budgets are cut to the bone, amid the economic fallout from the virus, so few are thinking about providing teachers (and students) with the potentially costly tools they need to feel safe in the classroom.

The reality is simple: In this crisis, teachers will be on the front lines. And we should start recognizing their sacrifice and heroism now as we prepare for hardship — and maybe heartbreak — in the school year to come.

EMPOWER FAMILIES

Virtual learning is changing the school-parent relationship and allowing caregivers to truly be partners in the learning experience. It's allowing them to be brought inside the classroom, see and support instruction in real-time, and become integrated like never before. To achieve that outcome, communication must be executed in an organized way.

Ask Deep Questions and Understand Families' Unique Situations

The relationship between schools and parents can grow deeper through this remote learning experience, but it's incumbent upon schools to understand caregivers' unique situations. That can help inform how schools tailor their teaching for students, as well as how to meet students where they are. When schools understand each family's individual circumstances, they're more likely to adapt instructional methods for each child, and they're more likely to deliver strong academic outcomes.

Be Strategic and Organized When Communicating

The transition to remote instruction can pose communications challenges for any organization, both inside and outside of teaching. For educators, a

USING YOUR CURRICULUM TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL GOOD

The new age of virtual learning presents an opportunity for educators and schools to offer something beyond the traditional education – it's a chance for families and students to be civically engaged and utilize a school's resources to engender social change. This year in particular, with much of the national discourse centered on inequity and social justice, the U.S Census presented an opportunity to push to raise awareness about a critical issue.

For Classical Charter Schools in the South Bronx, this included launching a campaign to boost awareness of the U.S Census and make sure their families are counted. Classical Charter's four schools planned on inviting elected officials to speak with students and families, and distributed surveys and informational materials. Ultimately, non-partisan issues like the Census have real-world consequences for these families and their communities.

pitfall to avoid is having parents accidentally be double- or triple- contacted for different reasons.

Calling, texting, or emailing multiple times for different purposes can cause communication fatigue among families, so schools must be strategic and ensure families aren't bombarded with daily calls. They should experience as seamless a process as possible.

Cultivating Community

Schools are truly the epicenters of the communities they serve, and the only way to navigate the COVID-19 crisis emotionally is to make sure students, teachers, and families feel a bond within that community. Educational events – family trivia nights, movie nights, and more – can serve dual purposes. They can transmit academic information and bring your community closer together at a time when everyone needs it most.

Virtual Celebrations and Special Occasions

Given how serious the COVID-19 crisis is, Bronx public charter schools have sought ways to bring some levity to the lives of students and their families. Celebrating special events and occasions in a virtual



fashion can make a difference. Scholar “show and tell” moments are also important to encouraging engagement. Having families film and photograph their students describing different academic projects they’re working on at home encourages academic curiosity, connects school communities, increases attendance, and

motivates students to continue learning. Celebrate and spotlight success wherever possible.

Meet Families Where They Are

Given the incredibly challenging economic and social circumstances experienced by students and families, it also means chronic absenteeism could be a challenge for schools and districts. Throughout the remote learning process, teachers and schools must demonstrate maximum flexibility and be as accommodating as possible for students. A differentiated approach is more important than ever.

- We have a moral imperative to meet students where they are, in the ways they need us, and when they need us during this time of crisis. Alternative assignments and approaches can be applied to students when needed on a schedule that works best for them.
- Individual assessments through one-on-one meetings may also be necessary for students who are struggling through the remote format. Just as schools must differentiate instruction, teachers should also consider adjusting the format for how learning is assessed based on the needs of the individual student.
- Through programs like Class Dojo, teachers can communicate directly with families throughout the day, and schools will have the ability to go above and beyond in their communications with families.

Construct a “COVID-19 Resource Page” on Your Website

Every school should create a centralized homepage that is clear and concise with important updates. Here's a guide to possible resources.

- **Create a Timeline of Announcements:** Some Bronx public charter schools have created a “Recent Updates” timeline on their Resources page. The timeline is chronological (with the most recent updates found on the top) and details every announcement, site addition, and action that has been taken surrounding Covid-19 and distance learning.
- **Make online curriculum easily accessible:** It’s important to place the learning tools and curriculum at the top of the Resources page. If families are to access curricular materials, then a “Learning Materials” section on a website needs to be visible.
- **Make your social media easy to find:** Include links to your social channels on this page so they are easily accessible.

Differentiate Channels of Communication and Use Social Media

Seamless communication with families is more important than ever, and leveraging every channel is critical. Social media is an important tool in that arsenal for updates and announcements, and a fast way to get the word out to a school community. But social media can also be a tool to have fun. Students and their families are turning to schools for a sense of normalcy in a complex time, and almost every family loves seeing their child on their schools’ Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. If something special is happening with scholars, it’s important to celebrate it virtually on social media, but also abide by the wishes of families who seek privacy.

BUILD A VIRTUAL SCHOOL CULTURE

As any organization knows, COVID-19 exacerbates and spotlights challenges that have existed – and compounds them. If a school had a rigorous program in-person and the school’s complex moving parts moved in sync prior to COVID’s arrival, then its school culture is more likely to be borne out in remote classrooms.

When COVID-19 struck, as public charter schools, though we did not have a centralized bureaucracy supporting us, we did have autonomy and flexibility in how we adapted. We could determine our response – rather than it's being determined for us. We could choose the virtual platforms that were best for our educators, select the technological tools that were most appropriate for our individual communities, and reorganize and reorient ourselves *because* of that flexibility.

The nimbleness of public charter schools like ours in the Bronx was a virtue as this crisis arrived, and as a result, some of our attendance rates ranged from the 80s and into the high 90s over the course of remote learning period this spring. Most of us provided eight hours or more per day of remote instruction, while providing extracurricular and social supports for our communities. That happened because we were successfully able to respond in real-time as the COVID-19 outbreak worsened, replicating our respective in-person school cultures in virtual settings.

As COVID-19 transforms teaching and learning, it's imperative to ensure all schools adapt school cultures that are rigorous, nurturing, and accountable. To do that, and to become the most effective virtual learning environments possible, engage your staff and listen to your teams.

Be Proactive

Every organization, inside and outside learning, must be proactive during this crisis. For teachers and families, schools are so often their primary source of information during these uncertain times. That means never waiting for someone else to make the first move. In sensitive times, immediate action can be necessary. If your organization sees a need or an emerging gap, fill it as soon as you can — even if that means navigating uncharted territory.

Check In Frequently With Staff

It's critical for school leaders to check in with teachers and staff on a regular basis, especially in a period of distress and uncertainty. Regular phone calls with faculty to check in on their questions, concerns, and overall wellbeing helps unify the organization and ensure that no one feels alone or forgotten. That helps build a nurturing environment – and is ultimately conducive to better academic outcomes for kids.

During these complex times, we can never forget teachers have their own safety concerns, health risks, loved ones, and personal challenges. Teachers are doing heroic work, so often putting the interests of children before themselves during this pandemic. That means it is absolutely incumbent upon school leaders to adapt and be responsive to the needs of their educators during these unique moments in history.

Encourage Collaboration

Remote instruction is a chance to engage team members and empower them. As school leaders and educators, don't merely handle new challenges within your own team or with immediate colleagues. Engage in cross-departmental collaboration and frequent brainstorming sessions. The more teachers and staff are heard, the more dynamic a school's virtual learning environment will be.

Set Goals and Keep Expectations High

Schools should set week-by-week attendance goals and maintain benchmarks for progress. In addition, keep track of your contacts with families, be data-driven in tracking the student work submitted classroom by classroom, and constantly use that data to evaluate progress. Always set expectations high among staff, students, and families. Taking these steps will culminate in a school culture that fosters academic success. An example of weekly goal-setting from Public Prep Network can be seen below.

SAMPLE GOAL-SETTING

Weekly Academic and Culture Goals

Week 3 (4/06-4/09): Launch Small Groups/Intervention <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Average daily attendance rate: 90%.• 95% of students and families will receive (2) personal phone calls from POC.• 75% of students will participate in a common Morning Meeting/Advisory or small group at least 2 times during the week.• 80% of students in Grades PK-2 will submit 1 assignment daily.• 85% of students in Grades 3-8 will submit 1 assignment daily.
Week 4 (4/10-4/17): SPRING BREAK <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asynchronous instructional resources for all grades PK-8 available in Google Classroom and on website (math and literacy).• Additional wellness activities and virtual field trips.
Week 5 (4/20-4/24): Increasing Opportunities for Student Engagement Average daily attendance rate: 90% <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 95% of students and families will receive (2) personal phone calls from POC (case manager).• 80% of students will participate in a common LIVE Morning Meeting/Advisory at least 2 times during the week.<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ SHIFT: Beginning in Week 6 these will be offered daily for ~15 minutes, preferably between 8:45am and 11:00 am.• 85% of students will read for at least 30-45 minutes twice daily and document this time.<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Using various means (a reading log, google form, note to teacher, etc.)• 85% of students in Gr PK-2 will submit assignments daily.<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ 1 literacy, 1 math, Weekly: 1 science◦ 1 daily activity (PK)• 90% of students in Gr 3-8 will submit assignments<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Daily: 1 literacy, 1 math, 1 science or 1 history; Weekly: 1 PETALs reflection

DELIVER SOCIAL SERVICE SUPPORTS

What the COVID-19 crisis is ultimately showing the world is what all educators have always known: schools are the anchors of our communities. They are second homes to the students we serve. And in the days after schools were closed in New York City, school buildings were seen as more than just places for student learning. The public saw us as the social service centers we've always been. The world realized that we don't just educate kids, we provide meals to food insecure children. We don't just teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, we provide childcare for essential workers. We are the foundation upon which our local economies run, and our classrooms and school buildings are simultaneously the access points and distribution centers for a variety of social services.

This fall, we must recognize that the wide variety of social service supports children need is critical to academic success. Access to housing, medical care, and food is

more important than ever. In this time of crisis, it's our schools that are ultimately going to be where so many families turn to for help.

Survey Parent Needs

Just as schools may conduct an inventory of families' technological needs, it's important to constantly gauge how families are weathering this public health and economic crisis. Regular check-ins with parents help ensure that families and children have what they need, whether it's food, housing, access to a doctor, or otherwise. Schools may not be able to provide for all of these needs, but they may be able to connect families to local community organizations and resources to help.

Deliver Meals

Food insecurity is real and has significant academic impacts. As cities and states are locked down, providing food directly from the school's kitchen may not be possible. Many schools within the Bronx worked with food vendors to deliver or provide pick-up days for families to get their meals from a reliable location at multiple points during the week. Communicating ways to get access to meals alleviates a real burden for families – and allows children to focus on learning.

CONCLUSION

As the nation is witnessing dramatic spikes in COVID-positive cases, the issue of reopening schools is becoming political when it should be about promoting health and education. In many ways, communities across the country are now trying to rapidly crack the remote learning code that public charter schools like ours cracked in the weeks and months after COVID-19 first arrived. As we have laid out in this document, the Bronx is now home to some of the best examples of remote learning in the country. There is much that can be extrapolated from our learning experience that can inform and enhance classrooms everywhere in the months ahead.

That's why we're offering this sketch of best practices, which is informed by our successes as well as our mistakes, for anyone for whom it can be helpful. There are no doubt many, many obstacles to remote learning. We cannot replace the intimacy of our school environments over Google Classroom, and we cannot replicate a one-on-one personal connection over Zoom.

But in this moment of national need, we have no choice but to try. We know as educators that there are more demands being placed on schools and their teachers than ever before. We must simultaneously solve for an existing and gaping digital divide, reinvent instruction, support our kids with the social services they need to experience stability, all while weathering this crisis as individuals with our own loved ones. Challenges abound. Yet, the work we do now will impact our kids for decades to come, and in this moment, we have an opportunity to become better teachers, better schools, and better school communities in the process. It's a unique moment in human history that every school should aim to seize. Because right now, our kids deserve no less.