Charm City Leaders Adapt as They Tackle Equity Gaps: Lessons from Baltimore City Public Schools' Response Spring 2020

Baltimore City Public Schools

A long-suffering district in a long-suffering city has its fragile progress threatened by the virus amid a mounting reckoning with race and inequality. Rather than succumb to the threat or try to wrest control from a decentralized system, leaders moved boldly and swiftly to control what they could (food, devices) and became an organization set on learning and adapting quickly.

Key lessons:

- Online instruction can give district leaders new visibility into the variation in teaching quality and what's taught. Districts should try to expose as many students as possible to the best teachers and courses.

- Social supports, including those offered by community schools, can help form connections with families and remove barriers to learning.

- In a crisis, decentralized districts can benefit from centralization in some key areas, including communication, expectation-setting, and curriculum quality.

- It pays to review data and feedback from parents, teachers, and students, and make necessary course corrections.

Number of schools: 161
Number of students: ~79,000
Grades served: PreK–12
> *Source*: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.

Families with income below the poverty level: 30.3%
> *Source*: National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2014–2018.

When Maryland's governor ordered all schools closed on March 12, Baltimore was not a COVID-19 hot spot. But there was little doubt that the city would soon be profoundly affected by the virus due to its high levels of poverty, cramped housing conditions, and prevalence of blue-collar workers who had to continue working in close quarters. Sure enough, by May, the

CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

city had become the most impacted jurisdiction in the state, with an infection rate three times that of Seattle, one of the cities affected earliest in the pandemic.

Baltimore City's schools were unprepared for the shutdown, with too few children with laptops and uneven wifi availability. A commitment to decentralization meant that schools had focused their budgets on current services and hadn't invested in infrastructure for remote learning.

Rather than succumb to the threat by trying to wrest total control from a decentralized school system, district leaders moved swiftly to control what they could, distributing food and establishing connectivity, like their peers in other school systems.

In March, district leaders urged school leaders to mount whatever form of remote learning they could. By June, increasing numbers of schools were delivering synchronous instruction, and all had greatly increased engagement with students and parents. However, some schools still relied primarily on videos and printed materials.

Background

Baltimore has become a symbol of urban dysfunction. A 2015 study showed it to be the worst big city in the country from the perspective of intergenerational mobility.

Low social mobility reflects major internal conflicts and social unrest in the city, painfully evident since Freddie Gray died in police custody in 2016. In Gray's Sandtown neighborhood, less than half the adults are employed, one-third of all residential structures are abandoned, and the violent crime rate is 23 per 1,000 residents, compared to a national rate of 3.7 per thousand. Nearly half the children in 9th through 12th grades are chronically absent from school and more than 60 percent of adults have less than a high school diploma, compared to the national average of less than 10 percent.

Before the pandemic hit last February, Baltimore's unemployment rate was 4.7 percent, but it climbed to 11.5 percent by May—35 percent above the statewide average. Black unemployment historically and now is 33 percent, higher than the overall citywide employment rate. In the same period employment in travel and hospitality sectors—major employers of less skilled workers—fell by 47 percent.

Springtime 2020

When schools were hit by the sudden closure in March, district leaders first prioritized food and connectivity. The district relied on individual schools to hand out devices. In total, they distributed 25,000 Chromebooks and created 10,000 new wifi hotspots. However, as many as 10,000 students were still unconnected by June, and many who have devices have not logged on to instruction available from the schools.

Baltimore schools had enjoyed significant autonomy about instructional methods and sequencing of materials. Because most schools pre-pandemic focused on improving traditional in-person instruction, only a few had invested in the equipment and connectivity required for remote learning. This became the number one priority districtwide after schools closed last March, and the district seized the initiative on connectivity—not relying on individual principals to act.

CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

Schools continued to have clear guidance on pacing and sequencing of instruction along with freedom on teaching strategy. What schools offered varied tremendously depending on faculty capacity and families' ability to access online instruction. Some schools still had to rely on study sheets, while others provided synchronous instruction. Some students performed labs over videoconference, while their neighbors received no science instruction at all. Principals reported that some young people connected *more deeply* in a nontraditional setting. As the leader of one alternative school told the superintendent, "You know Dr. S, I got to tell you. Some of our kids we never really saw that much . . . they're the ones logging in."

Many schools' use of Zoom and other social media tools gave district leaders unprecedented insight into what was being taught and how well. When teachers started putting class sessions online, they became visible to parents and to district leaders. According to Superintendent Sonja Santileses, vast differences in teaching became obvious. Some teachers excelled at setting clear expectations and providing high-quality virtual instruction for their students. Others lacked those strengths but did well in small-group follow-up, filling in items that students had missed by tutoring or helping parents stay engaged in student learning. This led district leaders to ask: How do we get the best teachers in front of the students that need them most?

The district hoped in the upcoming school year to extend the reach of those teachers who delivered excellent online instruction by broadcasting their lessons to schools across the district, and relying on other classroom teachers to lead discussion and for tutoring and enrichment.[1] The district also worked on developing a districtwide online school that any student or parent could access for remote learning.

Parents who logged into Zoom or other online media, or who had children in different schools, could see the differences among teachers. One alert parent had children in two schools, both considered successful. According to a district administrator:

> [One parent's] child has a teacher who could not navigate and so literally only had posted videos, no live. The other had full live every day and loved it. I don't think the teacher that didn't post is not necessarily a good teacher, [but lacked] the ability to manipulate and understand the platform. And my neighbor's child actually has a teacher that's doing science experiments via video, and there's another one who's like, 'Well, my kids haven't gotten any science.'

District leaders considered the new transparency and schools' dependence on parents as partners in instruction, and welcomed "the power of an informed demand by a community, customer, stakeholder group. Informed parents make less easily-placated customers, but customers much better positioned to make the work more effective."

---

1 The idea of designating extremely good presenters to do "first teach," and give hundreds or thousands of student access to them, is central to Baltimore's thinking about the future. It could not be implemented last spring or even as schools prepared to open this fall, but district leaders are sure it can be done, and within the collective bargaining agreement. As one said, "We haven't really used the flexibility in the CBA [collective bargaining agreement]. . . . I think we have built in our compensation system the potential for role differentiation that would do this. The challenge for us is, and this is the district's fault, this is not teachers' fault. We never really pursued it because of changing leadership at the district level."

CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

Not going it alone

District leaders did not believe the district had all the expertise and resources needed to serve children during the spring or later, so they welcomed help.

During the spring, district leaders started considering possible outside partners to develop a districtwide online school. Though the district had its own considerable capacities, one leader said, "We might not have all the internal expertise to do this well, and there is no need to fake it. We'd rather partner with someone than give kids less than the best available." District leaders were also open to partnerships with private schools and parent groups, considering these a natural element of public education in the pandemic. They did not raise the specter of white or middle-class flight:

> A significant percentage of the people pushing for that access are brown and Black, low-income folks, working class folks, working income-level folks who want an option for their children that addresses both character needs, academic needs and is rooted in their community.

Charter schools had long been part of Baltimore's landscape, and district leaders were open to more partnerships with both conventional charters and micro-schools, especially to increase the number of Black and brown providers. As one district leader said, "They're people who have models of what they can do that I wished they could do inside the traditional system but until we get to the place where we can support that, we need to recruit."

Before the pandemic, Baltimore had created 75 community schools, with diverse partners to enhance social, health, and academic support for students. These schools were also among those with the closest relationships with families—which in turn led to far greater student participation in remote learning last spring. As superintendent Santileses commented, "The schools that had the strongest connections to families prior to the pandemic were most successful in maintaining a sense of cohesiveness, even in a remote learning environment. Those schools who were challenged with that were even more challenged in a remote learning environment."

Communication

As one district leader observed, the success of the district's efforts to provide instruction during the pandemic depended on the ability "to communicate and receive feedback from the variety of stakeholders. Schools will not run if we come out with a plan that does not have significant teacher fingerprint and influence on it."

But communication with professional educators was just the tip of the iceberg. Outreach involved nearly 17,000 families, 4,900 teachers, more than 300 school leaders, and 1,850 students, as well as more than 55 partner organizations—through interviews, meetings, surveys, town halls, focus groups, and working groups. District leaders also met with the Baltimore teachers union two to three times per week starting in the spring, provided regular committee meeting updates to the Board throughout the recovery planning process, and connected with elected officials through focus groups, weekly calls with legislative leadership, addressing city council committee hearings, and participating in legislative town halls.

Looking ahead to fall

The district's outreach to many constituencies revealed a challenging diversity of views, especially about how school should open this fall. Families and school leaders were twice as favorable about a hybrid model as teachers—41 percent to 21 percent. Half of families and school leaders, but three–quarters of school staff preferred virtual learning only. Only 12 percent of parents favored all in-person learning, but even fewer teachers (3 percent) and school leaders (1 percent) did so. In July, the Baltimore teachers union and local PTA issued a joint statement demanding remote learning as the only option for school opening in September.

On August 14 the district issued a plan, *Closing the Distance*, to open a week late in September and rely entirely on remote learning for the first six weeks. The district's plan sets criteria for shifting to hybrid approaches with students physically in school part-time. It also makes special provisions for students most in need of direct teacher contact. The current target date for launching hybrid learning is mid-October, depending on prevalence of the COVID-19 virus.

Maryland's funding system protects Baltimore schools from dire cuts in the 2020–21 school year. However, the district expects to take a hit of more than $400 per pupil for protective gear, facilities cleaning, and other safety measures.

Financial stability has permitted confident planning. Baltimore City Public Schools' reopening plan is clear and accessible. It calls for fully remote learning for the first six weeks of the school year, and then an assessment of whether hybrid learning, with students present in school for some time each week, can begin. Even after hybrid schooling starts, families may opt for continued remote learning.

The criteria for switching to hybrid learning are also clear, based on citywide rates of positive COVID tests, student absenteeism, the absence of hotspots, and rates of decline in positive COVID tests.

Closing the Distance also provides detailed examples of students' and teachers' daily schedules under both remote and hybrid learning scenarios, as well as arrangements for attendance taking and grading. It pledges, "We will focus on grade level content as our academic priority, rather than on remediation."

Parents and educators in Baltimore still face many uncertainties. The daily schedules require a great deal of live online instruction, which will tax students and teachers and might exhaust some. But district leaders have done a great deal to make clear commitments and limit uncertainties for parents, teachers, and the broader community.

From a standing start last March, Baltimore developed ways to connect and support students, prepare for online instruction, and introduce hybrid schooling when public health conditions permit. Led by a superintendent who has children in the schools, the district worked hard to prepare parents for the roles they would play and maximized the time students would spend learning. As schools resume this fall, it will seek continuous improvement, both by solving emergent problems and building on exemplars of good teaching. For the future, district leaders will seek to teach effectively online, in hybrid settings, and in traditional schools.

About This Project

This is the first qualitative analysis released as part of the American School District Panel (ASDP)—a national effort by CRPE, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, and Kitamba to surface and examine trends in the policy and practice of school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs).

This groundbreaking effort will enable district and CMO leaders an opportunity to share their perspectives and contribute to decisions about education policy and practice. Researchers will survey leaders and staff from a representative panel of school districts and CMOs across the country, as well as conduct a complementary set of qualitative studies, following these districts and CMOs over time to monitor trends.

This analysis is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. We also thank all the school system leaders who, under difficult circumstances, took the time to share lessons and insights with us.

While this analysis draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.