

COVID-19 Crisis Response in Pajaro Valley Started with Listening to Families

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COVID-19 has disrupted California's education system in fundamental ways. Districts across the state are quickly creating strategies to serve all students, and many are designing their response around the needs of their most vulnerable students. This brief highlights Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD)'s crisis response, which prioritizes the needs of their Spanish-, Mixteco bajo-, and English-speaking community. PVUSD began their distance learning transition by providing access to digital devices, phone-based and in-person tech support, and increased multilingual family outreach. District staff are collaborating with a wide network of community organizations to meet students' instructional and noninstructional needs. The model that PVUSD is building addresses multiple levels of equity and will benefit their students and families even after school resumes.



As local and state leaders respond to the unique challenges presented by the onset of COVID-19, sharing effective practices is especially critical given the scope of the crisis and the speed with which districts will need to make changes. This process of rapid response requires that leaders at all levels of the system have access to promising strategies that they can quickly and effectively implement in as well as opportunities to learn from one another about what works under which conditions and for which students. This practice brief is the first in a series in partnership with Pivot Learning that profiles promising responses to the COVID-19 crisis to meet vulnerable students' needs.

COVID-19 presents an array of challenges for school districts. In this brief, we share some promising practices learned from California's Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD), particularly in the areas of family engagement and instructional access for English learners. Annually, Pivot Learning and its subsidiary Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE)¹ work with nearly 100 school districts in California and nationally. PVUSD, a long-time partner of Pivot Learning and CORE, is a member of the national League of Innovative Schools and a model of inclusive, data-driven decision-making. Over 40 percent of PVUSD's population are classified as English learners, and the district has a history of serving all students through bilingual programming and a whole-child approach. In this brief, we detail the district's efforts to provide educational and other supports for English learners and their families in ways that specifically address educational equity.

Crisis Response with an Equity Lens

On March 16th, Santa Cruz County's shelter-in-place order suddenly changed the lives of thousands of families in PVUSD. The district closed its schools for the remainder of the school year and began their transition to distance learning.² For the first week of the closure, leaders distributed meals, instructional staff developed distance learning expectations, and the district handed out Chromebooks and hotspots for students who did not have them. By the second week, distance learning began, and by the third week, the district began adjusting its grading policy and tracking students' distance learning engagement.

But planning for school closures had already been ongoing for months—beginning as early as January. According to Superintendent Michelle Rodriguez, the district had already seen significant loss in average daily attendance in fall 2019, with the first communication about COVID-19 on January 24, 2020 from Dr. Rodriguez to the educational community.

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SUPERINTENDENT MICHELLE RODRIGUEZ

As they designed their COVID-19 response, PVUSD administrators considered the many barriers to distance learning facing their highest need students and parents. As Superintendent Rodriguez explained: “The most important thing for me is to develop policies, procedures, and processes with an equity lens in mind. If we don't develop those policies with an equity lens in mind, we inadvertently create inequity, then scramble to address it.”³

Distance Learning: Prioritizing Access to Instruction

Superintendent Rodriguez's team determined that once schools closed, student needs would quickly arise around access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and instructional materials. The district already had a Chromebook for every child used and housed within the schools, as well as 250 hotspots, as part of their pre-COVID-19 personalized learning initiatives. For their crisis response, the district procured an additional 750 hotspots and then decided how to distribute these resources to families at home without exacerbating equity divides.

One of PVUSD's distance learning principles was to avoid depending on parent/guardian availability to support students' home learning. Parent/guardian ability to support schoolwork varies based on socioeconomic factors, and COVID-19 distinctions between essential and nonessential workers have made these divides more prominent.⁴

For example, when PVUSD began distributing digital devices to families for use at home during COVID-19 school closures, they initially limited distribution to students in Grades 3–12, because those students can log on without the help of an adult. Now that schools are closed for an extended time period, PVUSD distributed devices to the remaining students in Grades 1–2 and transitioned to a blended learning model for those grades. Younger students can access instruction through a mix of online instruction and paper packets available in English and Spanish, again designed to avoid creating divides based on parent/guardian availability.

In addition, the district provides some digital educational activities that are available offline to complement the core online instruction teachers provide. The PVUSD program Paso a Paso (Footsteps 2 Brilliance),¹⁵ which was in place 2 years before COVID-19, is available for free to any family with a student in Grade 3 or lower. Once families download the mobile app, bilingual, culturally relevant literacy content is available to students and families offline.

Table 1. Percentage of Pajaro Valley Unified School District vs California Students by Support Type

	PVUSD*	California
Receiving free and reduced-price meals	77 ⁴	59 ⁵
English learners	42 ⁶	19 ⁹
Spanish-speaking	40 ⁷	17 ¹⁰
Mixteco bajo-speaking	2 ⁸	Unlisted ¹¹
Experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity	14 ¹²	4 ¹³

* PVUSD is located in rural Santa Cruz County. The district serves over 20,000 students.

Students in later grades, who can independently use their Chromebooks and other devices, are accessing instruction through Google Classroom.

For English learners, teachers provide additional English Language Development (ELD) instruction, differentiated by student grade level and level of English proficiency. For younger students and long-term English learners, English learner specialists provide small-group virtual instruction. Older students and those with higher English proficiency receive different scaffolded supports.

While PVUSD is distributing hotspots provided through a partnership with T-Mobile and Google, the team will need a more permanent solution for student internet access. "We really are trying to support the digital divide as a long-term process. Hotspots do not have a community equity focus. Hotspots only provide access to PVUSD devices, they filter out some content, and they don't work with every device the parent has," says Superintendent Rodriguez. Working with Cruzio Internet, a local community partner, has helped the district to expand internet access for families and address the digital divide.

PVUSD is concurrently considering the long-term equity implications their crisis response can inform.

Working with Families in Their Native Language

PVUSD's communication with families has been a crucial part of their COVID-19 response, since families now play an even larger role in supporting learning at home. District administrators report that outgoing communication almost doubled in the first 3 weeks of school closures; the district is sending out some kind of communication approximately every other day. Fortunately, the district has a long history of sending timely, relevant communication to its families in English, Spanish, and Mixteco bajo, an Indigenous Mexican language.

The district's high percentage of bilingual teachers and staff has been instrumental in providing multilingual family outreach. Teachers are considered the first layer of family communication support, so the district informs them of all updates first. The district's Migrant Education Department, which employs recent graduates who are trusted members of the community, assists with family outreach. Parent engagement groups, staffed by district teachers and administrators, provide another level of communication between the district and families.

To manage tech issues that families face when relying on Chromebooks, PVUSD set up a two-pronged tech support system. Support is available through a hotline staffed by 10 technicians who speak English, Spanish, and Mixteco bajo. The district has also set up drive-up tech support at the district office, where technicians can fix or replace Chromebooks on the spot.

PVUSD's website and social media have also been key elements of their family outreach plan. "One of the most fascinating things Dr. Rodriguez has done is put herself out to parents and community. There is an FAQ portal [called 'Ask Dr. Rodriguez'] on our website. On Friday, she takes the top 10 clusters of questions that appear and writes detailed answers to them," says central

Increasing Mixteco bajo-language communication has been a priority in PVUSD's response plan. Although only about two percent of PVUSD's English learners are native Mixteco bajo speakers, the language response has been inclusive. Mixteco bajo does not have a written medium, so phone calls and videos are the primary tools for district-family communication. While PVUSD has fewer Mixteco bajo-speaking staff than Spanish-speaking staff, the district uses Language Line translation services to connect with families. When the district realized that Mixteco bajo-language families were not informed about social distancing protocols and how to access Google Classroom, they created and shared Mixteco bajo-language informational videos.¹⁶

office employee Andrea Willy. These timely COVID-19 responses are published on the district website, promoted on social media, and emailed to district staff and families.

District staff report that family usage of their Facebook page has almost quadrupled during the shelter-in-place order. And when Superintendent Rodriguez realized that some students are accessing information primarily through their student devices—which block access to Facebook—she began sharing information in English and Spanish via Twitter. The district has also increased their use of SMS text messaging in English and Spanish, a feature they can use with their new student information system, Synergy.

PVUSD's multilingual family outreach efforts have benefited from pre-existing and long-standing partnerships with local organizations. A community health clinic, Salud Para La Gente, created a Mixteco-language video about staying healthy during COVID-19, which the district shared with families and students. A partnership with Digital Nest helps the team reach out to Latinx youth, encouraging them to develop their existing technology skills while sheltering in place.

Looking to the Future

PVUSD is managing a delicate balance of addressing urgent needs while planning for a future when school resumes. The district has released a new student-centered grading policy¹⁷ to reflect California's guidance of Hold Harmless grading guidelines.¹⁸ Dr. Rodriguez and her leadership team formed Hold Harmless Guiding Principles to frame the discussions with stakeholder groups that would cocreate grading policies for high school, middle school, and elementary. The district's new grading policy advises high school teachers to evaluate student distance learning work alongside their third quarter grades to determine their fourth quarter grades. PVUSD has also implemented concurrent credit recovery as a new tool that can support English learners in taking courses needed for graduation and in meeting California's secondary school A–G requirements simultaneously. This measure will support English learner success even after the shelter-in-place order is lifted. Virtual summer school is on the books as another way for students to recover lost credits.

District administrators are already collaborating with schools to share data about which students have not logged onto Google Classroom, so that they can plan instruction for them now and when brick-and-mortar school resumes. The approach represents a new two-

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DISTRICT PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER ALICIA JIMÉNEZ

tiered system: the district's tech department provides schools with a list of students who have not yet logged on. Teachers are responsible for conducting initial student outreach efforts. If teachers cannot reach the student, the principal, assistant principal, or counselor takes over. PVUSD is also planning for a school year with increased social distancing protocols in place; for example, the district is considering the logistics of ramping up its existing independent study program.

One note of hope: district administrators believe their efforts to reach out to families now will benefit the community long into the future. As District Public Information Officer Alicia Jiménez describes: “Non-English speaking families have the same concerns that all of us have. The problem was, maybe we needed to listen better, provide information, and engage them in their preferred language. Now we have this opportunity to listen.”

Lessons Learned from PVUSD for State and Local Policy

- **Districts need to begin with an equity mindset.** When districts design programs with their most vulnerable students in mind, they are better able to reach all students.
- **District administrators should facilitate communication in every home language.** Districts that expand their messaging beyond English can reach their most vulnerable families and encourage connection.
- **Stable funding from the state in the year to come will be critical.** District leaders shared concerns that the state education budget would face deep cuts in summer 2020 and they would have to make significant cuts as a result. Any such cuts would force them to dramatically reduce instructional supports during a period in which they expect to be trying to accelerate student learning as part of their COVID-19 recovery.

Endnotes

- ¹ All references to Pivot Learning refer to Pivot Learning and its subsidiary the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE).
- ² Pajaro Valley Unified School District. (2020a). *PVUSD student centered access & equity during COVID-19*. pps-pajaro-ca.schoolloop.com/file/1516177972153/1303568743253/4882961864952755784.pdf
- ³ All quotations from district officials are from interviews conducted in relation to this brief.
- ⁴ Ed-Data. (2018–19a). *Pajaro Valley unified: Free and reduced-price meals*. ed-data.org/district/Santa-Cruz/Pajaro-Valley-Unified
- ⁵ Ed-Data. (2018–19b). *California public schools: Free and reduced-price meals*. ed-data.org/state/CA
- ⁶ Ed-Data. (2018–19c). *Pajaro Valley unified: English learners*. ed-data.org/district/Santa-Cruz/Pajaro-Valley-Unified
- ⁷ Ed-Data. (2017–18a). *Pajaro Valley unified: Languages of English learners*. ed-data.org/district/Santa-Cruz/Pajaro-Valley-Unified. Percentage refers to the percentage of all students in the state who speak the language.
- ⁸ Ed-Data, 2017–18a.
- ⁹ Ed-Data. (2018–19d). *California public schools: English learners*. ed-data.org/state/CA
- ¹⁰ Ed-Data. (2017–18b). *California public schools: Languages of English learners*. ed-data.org/state/CA. Percentage refers to the percentage of all students in the state who speak the language.
- ¹¹ Ed-Data, 2017–18b.
- ¹² Ed-Data. (2017–18c). *Pajaro Valley Unified: Homeless student cumulative enrollment*. ed-data.org/district/Santa-Cruz/Pajaro-Valley-Unified
- ¹³ Ed-Data. (2017–18d). *California public schools: Homeless student cumulative enrollment*. ed-data.org/state/CA
- ¹⁴ Tomer, A. & Kane, J. W. (2020, March 31). *How to protect essential workers during COVID-19*. Brookings. brookings.edu/research/how-to-protect-essential-workers-during-covid-19
- ¹⁵ Pajaro Valley Unified School District. (2019). *Paso a paso/Step by step*. pps-pajaro-ca.schoolloop.com/pf4/cms2/view_page?d=x&group_id=1500178971614&vdid=ia271g1arn8u5id
- ¹⁶ Pajaro Valley Unified School District. (2020, March 28). *Infomación Sobre Coronavirus en Mixteco* [Video]. YouTube. youtube.com/watch?v=xNGOmQekuEE
- ¹⁷ Pajaro Valley Unified School District. (2020b). *PVUSD grading discussion principles during school closure*. pps-pajaro-ca.schoolloop.com/file/1516177972153/1303568743253/6128705487250767986.pdf
- ¹⁸ California Department of Education. (n.d.). *FAQs on grading and graduation requirements*. cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/gradgraduationfaq.asp

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About Pivot Learning




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Our mission is to partner with educators to design and implement solutions to their greatest challenges in achieving educational justice. We envision a future where our public schools provide our most underserved students with an outstanding education. In 2017, Pivot acquired the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE), which enables us to provide evidence-based professional learning to improve literacy and math instruction.

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Timar, T., & Carter, A. (2017, June). **Surprising strengths and substantial needs: Rural district implementation of common core state standards** [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Timar, T., Carter, A., & Ford, N. (2018, October). **The network solution: How rural district networks can drive continuous improvement** [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.



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