

How Afterschool is Supporting Learning and Recovery During COVID-19

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On March 19, 2020, California became the first state to issue a statewide stay-at-home order in response to COVID-19.¹ Over the course of the following 12 days, 33 additional states followed suit issuing stay-at-home orders,² and all 50 states, including the District of Columbia and the American territories of Guam, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico, ordered schools to close.³ By early April, more than 90 percent of people living in the U.S., including more than 55 million students in 124,000 public and private schools, found their lives upended by the country's response to slow the spread of the coronavirus.^{4,5} At the time of the release of this issue brief, the U.S. alone has more than 4.2 million confirmed cases and lost more than 146,000 lives due to the virus.⁶

In response, communities have banded together to meet the immediate health, economic, and basic day-to-day needs of families. Joining local efforts, afterschool programs across the country adjusted their operations to best address the urgent needs of the children and families in their community: delivering meals, providing care for children of essential workers, finding ways to keep students engaged in learning remotely, and remaining a source of support to students and families as they confronted the many challenges created by the coronavirus. Working with communities that are often experiencing particularly intense hardships caused by the pandemic, afterschool programs remain a critical partner to help young people emerge from this crisis strong, resilient, and hopeful.

“One of the certainties as we navigate through this pandemic is that all children will benefit from being well known, well cared for, and well prepared. Afterschool programs have a long history of designing programs based on what young people need in order to help them be healthier and more ready to learn. Together schools and community organizations can co-design the future of learning *in ways that interrupt historic inequities* and help ALL young people emerge from this crisis strong, resilient and hopeful.”

- Tony Smith, former Illinois State Superintendent and Oakland Unified School District Superintendent

Challenges on multiple fronts

In addition to a national health crisis, the effects of the pandemic have reached into all corners of life in the U.S., reverberating through the economy, the educational system, and individuals' overall well-being.

An economic crisis

After more than a year and a half of an unemployment rate staying at or below 4 percent, dipping as low as 3.5 percent in February 2020, unemployment is currently in the double digits, from a high of 14.7 percent in April to an unemployment rate of 11.1 percent in June.⁷ Between mid-March and June, more than 52 million people filed for unemployment.⁸ Looking at the coronavirus' impact on household finances, half of survey respondents in a National Bureau of Economic Research paper reported financial loss due to the coronavirus, with average losses up to approximately \$33,000.⁹

As a result of layoffs, furloughs, and reduced hours due to stay-at-home orders, individuals have found themselves struggling to meet basic needs, such as food security and shelter. Feeding America estimated that the number of people experiencing food insecurity as a result of COVID-19 could reach between 9.9 and 17.1 million individuals,¹⁰ and in a July survey of 4,000 individuals, more than 1 in 3 renters (36 percent) and 30 percent of homeowners reported that they were unable to make their full on-time payment for the month.¹¹

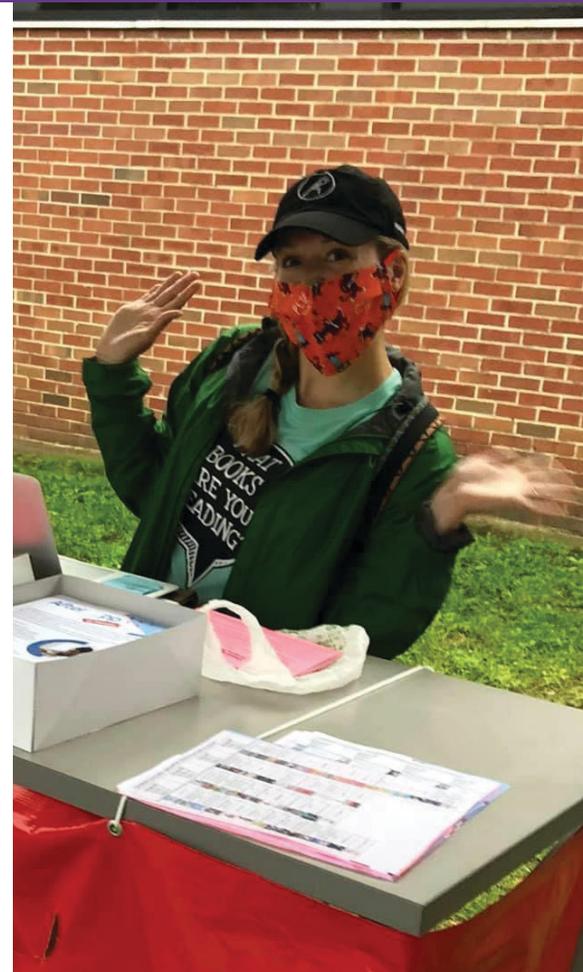
A crisis in education

Beginning with 26 states ordering or recommending school closures on March 16 and ending with 48 states in total extending school closures through the end of the 2020 school year by early May, COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the K-12 school system.¹² Research by NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association) projects that due to school closures, students may start the new school year having lost close to 30 percent of their learning gains in reading and 50 percent of their gains in math from the previous year.¹³

School closures have created educational challenges for both teachers and students. In a USA Today/Ipsos poll of teachers, more than half did not believe that their school district trained them well for online or distance learning (55 percent), and while 63 percent said that they are working more than usual, a similar number reported that they cannot do their job properly (62 percent).¹⁴ Among students, it is estimated that students missed approximately 30 percent of in-person learning during the 2019-2020 school year,¹⁵ with multiple accounts of a considerable number of students missing online lessons.¹⁶ Based on an Education Week survey of teachers, approximately 1 in 5 students are not attending online classes or staying in contact with their teachers.¹⁷ District level surveys provide corresponding accounts. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District reported that one-third of its students were not regularly participating in online learning and an April poll of Maryland superintendents found that since school closures, up to 1 in 4 students in certain districts were not participating in online lessons or picking up homework packets.^{18,19}

As school closures continued through the spring, student morale and engagement in school also flagged. In Education Week's survey tracker, 76 percent of teachers and district leaders surveyed reported that student morale levels were lower in early April compared to before COVID-19, up 15 percentage points from late March, and in late May, 44 percent of teachers reported that their students' current level of engagement was "much lower" compared to before the coronavirus closures, up 6 percentage points from late March.²⁰

⁹ Respondents' average loss of income was \$5,293 and the average loss of wealth was \$33,482.



A crisis of well-being

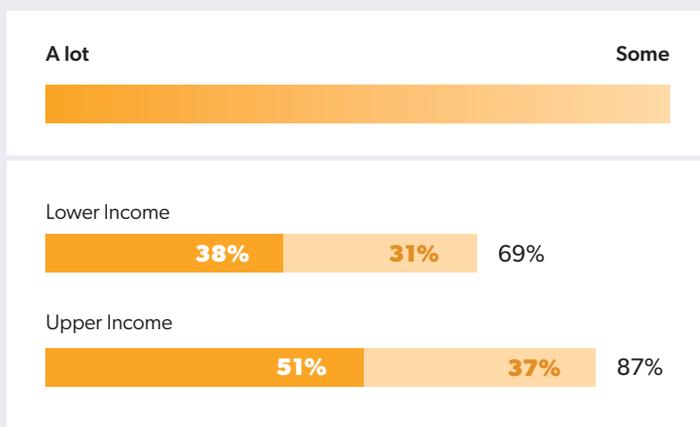
While the pandemic’s toll on physical health is evident, the negative effect it is having on the mental and emotional well-being of children is also becoming apparent. In a study of children in Hubei Province, China, where cases of the coronavirus were first observed, researchers found a higher prevalence of symptoms of depression and anxiety among children compared to studies conducted before COVID-19.²¹ In the United States, a Save the Children survey of youth ages 6 to 18 found that more than 1 in 5 reported that they were anxious (27 percent), stressed (23 percent), and unhappy (22 percent).²² In a separate survey of youth ages 13-19, more than 1 in 4 reported an increase in “losing sleep because of worry, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling constantly under strain, or experiencing a loss of confidence in themselves,” and high percentages reported feeling “much more concerned than usual” about their health (52 percent), family’s financial situation (40 percent), and education (39 percent).²³

Parents are aware of the effect of the coronavirus on their children. Save the Children’s survey found that 3 in 4 parents (76 percent) were somewhat or extremely worried about their child’s “emotional and mental wellbeing as it relates to the coronavirus pandemic,”²⁴ and close to 3 in 10 parents in a June Gallup poll reported that their child is “experiencing harm to emotional or mental health” due to social distancing and business and school closures.²⁵

Educational disparities during COVID-19

Surveys have found disparities in access to educational supports during the pandemic, which in turn are exacerbating inequities between higher and lower-income families.

Lower-income families are less likely than their higher-income counterparts to report that their child has received “a lot” or “some” online instruction from their school since it closed...

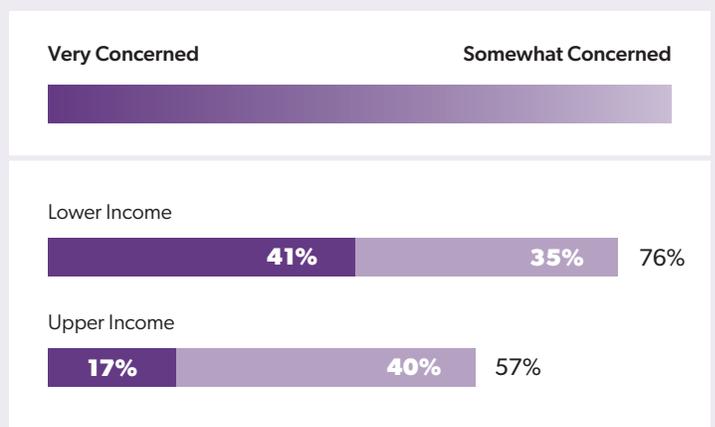


Exacerbating existing disparities

The pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated the inequities that exist in the U.S., from the disparities in the health care system to the widening income gap. Based on available data, communities of color have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus, with an overrepresentation of COVID-19 hospitalizations among Black/African Americans and the death rates among Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx persons higher than that of white and Asian individuals.²⁶ Surveys have also found differences in economic security when looking at race and ethnicity. A Pew Research survey found that 61 percent of Hispanic/Latinx and 44 percent of Black/African American respondents reported that due to the coronavirus, someone in their household had become unemployed or lost wages, compared to 38 percent of white respondents.²⁷ Black/African American (48 percent) and Hispanic/Latinx respondents (44 percent) were also much more likely to say that they were unable to pay bills or only able to make partial payments than white respondents (26 percent).²⁸

Lower-income families also are experiencing greater adversities in regards to education during the pandemic. In a May Educators for Excellence survey, less than half of teachers felt that their school was meeting the needs of students from low-income household (46 percent).²⁹ One example, as reported by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), is that wealthier school districts are twice as likely as school districts serving low-income communities to require live video instruction from teachers (29

...while at the same time expressing higher levels of concern that their children are falling behind in school as a result of disruptions caused by the coronavirus.



Based on a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted April 7-12, 2020. Lower-income and upper-income family designations are based on Pew Research Center’s tiers, where a lower-income family’s (a three-person household) average annual income is approximately less than \$41,000 and an upper-income family household income is greater than \$120,400.

Totals may be different due to rounding.

percent vs. 15 percent).³⁰ Additionally, in a Pew Research Center survey, higher-income parents were much more likely than lower-income parents to report that their children had received some online instruction from their school since it closed (87 percent vs. 69 percent).³¹ Lower-income parents are also the most worried about their children falling behind academically due to school closures.³²

Low-income families' educational challenges appear to stem from access to technology and the resources of their schools. For example, compared to teachers serving more affluent students, teachers serving low-income students were more than two times as likely to say that their students' homework completion rates were much worse than before the pandemic (39 percent vs. 17 percent).³³ And, low-income families are four times more likely than higher-income families to report that it is likely that their child will have to complete their schoolwork on a cell phone (43 percent vs. 10 percent) and nine times more likely to say their child will not be able to complete their schoolwork because of lack of access to a computer at home (36 percent vs. 4 percent).³⁴ According to the Educators for Excellence survey, close to half of teachers (49 percent) serving a high percentage of students from low-income households reported that 50 percent or less of their students participate daily in their online lessons.³⁵

Afterschool programs stepping up

Across the country, afterschool programs continue to be a source of support to the children and families in their community as they adapt to the challenging circumstances and stressors created by the pandemic. Although the shift in programs' activities and services varied as school closures and shelter-in-place orders went into effect and vary as states move through the phases of reopening, the clear throughline of programs' supports is remaining connected and responsive to the needs of their community, placing the well-being and safety of children and families at the forefront of program efforts.

Providing essential care for the children of essential workers

As states issued stay-at-home orders and schools closed to slow the spread of COVID-19, many essential workers, including health care workers, first responders, and grocery store employees, were faced with the predicament of finding a safe and supervised space for their children while they reported in-person to work to ensure the continuity of states' critical infrastructures. In Georgia, the **YMCA of Metro Atlanta**, while closed for regular services, recognized the need to care for the children of essential workers and opened its doors to 2,000 children of Atlanta's essential workers. Open Monday through Friday from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., YMCA of Metro Atlanta provided daily academic time to help students complete school work, enrichment activities such as STEAM lessons, and health and wellness time, where group instructors led physical fitness classes, while following CDC safety guidelines. The program also expanded their hunger relief programs, and as of mid-June, served 164,053 meals, averaging close to 2,000 meals a day. This summer, the program is switching to a traditional daily day camp model, incorporating week-long specialty camps, with activities that will include LEGO robotics, swimming, and soccer.

Providing critical supports to underserved communities

Afterschool programs are an integral community partner to reach groups that are traditionally underserved. For example, in communities of concentrated poverty, afterschool program participation is higher than the national average.³⁶ In rural communities, participation in afterschool programs grew from 11 percent in 2009 to 13 percent in 2014.³⁷ In Waterville, a rural community in Kansas, **Valley Heights Community Education** responded to circumstances created by the pandemic by delivering meals to families due to the food insecurity challenges their community was facing. As the only program in the area providing meals, Valley Heights served an average of 357 lunches and 269 breakfasts daily, a greater number than they served during a typical school year. Additionally, as rural households are more than two times as likely to report a lack of consistent high-speed internet,³⁸ Valley Heights is delivering hardcopies of school work and other materials



to families in need. They have also partnered with the school family advocate to provide or help families connect with other necessary resources and partnered with their local school's counselor and family advocate to check in on the well-being of their students and families, completing more than 300 home visits over the course of three months. Over the summer, Valley Heights will offer in-person programming with a focus on outside learning, physical activity, and team building. In response to both CDC guidelines and the transportation challenges that exist in rural communities, instead of operating in one central location, Valley Heights will open up buildings in neighboring towns, as well as operate two food distribution sites.

Located in Charlotte, North Carolina, **ourBRIDGE for KIDS (ourBRIDGE)** is an afterschool program that works with immigrant and refugee students new to the United States. The program—whose three core pillars are academic support, trauma-informed care, and cultural pride—serves approximately 150 K-8 students daily who represent 22 different cultures, 100 percent of whom qualify for federal free or reduced price lunch, and more than 80 percent are English language learners. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and North Carolina's stay-at-home orders, ourBRIDGE regularly checked in with their students and families, asking them what their concerns were, what their needs were, and how ourBRIDGE could help. Responding to the needs of their community, the program distributed more than 100,000 meals and bags of groceries to immigrant and refugee families in Charlotte's east side neighborhoods; translated information related to the pandemic in Arabic, Amharic, Burmese, Hindi, Farsi, French, Nepali, Spanish, and Swahili; and served as an advocate for families experiencing challenges accessing resources available to them.

Keeping kids engaged in learning

At the **Irwin A and Robert D Goodman Community Center (GCC)** in Madison, Wisconsin, staying connected to their students and families has been the driving force behind their response to the coronavirus. In addition to hosting up to four online classes or activities a day and offering online tutoring sessions, GCC staff hold office hours and open chat rooms to speak one-on-one with parents and students. For parents who are unable to join office hours or chat rooms, GCC staff reach out directly to check in and see how their family is doing. Staff also regularly communicate with school day teachers to find out if there are students that would benefit from additional support and if there are students who the program can check in on. For example, using funds from an emergency COVID-19 grant, the program purchased Chromebooks for students who were not able to receive them through the school district. The program also partners with local schools to provide families with care packages that include school supplies, art materials, activities, games, and books, as well as personal care and household products that are not available through the local food pantry.

In response to COVID-19, **Breakthrough Miami**—which during a typical school year serves 1,300 5th-12th grade scholars who are predominately from low-income households, and employs a staff of 400 volunteers and 130 teaching fellows—shifted its programming to distance learning, additional parent and family education, and providing or connecting families to needed supports, such as food, housing assistance, and technology. Each week following their district's school closures, Breakthrough Miami introduced new program elements, including virtual courses and academic support sessions to help their scholars with distance learning. Site directors also hosted virtual workshops to show parents how to navigate distance learning, walking them through various learning platforms and best practices to help keep their kids engaged in learning. To keep spirit up among their students and staff, the program hosted a number of virtual events, including Friday night gatherings, dance parties, 8th grade celebrations, and volunteer recognition ceremonies. This summer, Breakthrough Miami will hold day-long virtual summer programming comprised of a mix of virtual lessons on subjects such as history and coding, time to work individually on projects, one-on-one sessions with teaching fellows, and special events bringing the full group together.



Supporting the well-being of children and families

As the pandemic has taken an emotional and mental toll on children and families, the supports provided by afterschool programs—including a safe environment, trusted adults and mentors, and connections to community resources families need—have become that much more indispensable. In response to the impact of COVID-19 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, **AfterOpp**, part of The Opportunity Project, a citywide intermediary for expanded learning, initiated phone banks to keep in touch with their students and their families, checking in on overall wellness and what resources were needed. Contacting families at least twice a week, AfterOpp was able to help their families obtain basic necessities such as food and personal hygiene products. AfterOpp also worked with partners such as the STEM Alliance and Debate League to provide online clubs where small groups of students could participate in Zoom calls and check-ins that ensured their students still received one-on-one interaction with program staff, maintained positive relationships with one another, and allowed program staff to monitor students' overall well-being. In further service of supporting their students' well-being, AfterOpp produced a series of mindfulness videos that students could participate in, as well as reflection activities, which included a COVID-19 time capsule and a reflection journal, to encourage students to think about, capture, process, and reflect on their feelings during the pandemic.

In West Virginia, the **Boys & Girls Club of Parkersburg** has made checking in with families through both phone and video conference calls a regular component of their outreach in response to COVID-19. On a weekly basis, program staff connect with families to make sure that they are healthy and safe, asking about food insecurity, transportation needs, internet access, and other resources they need at the moment. Staff also lead regular video "teen chats" and provide other virtual club activities and challenges to stay in touch with students. These video chats allow staff members to keep an eye on children's overall safety and well-being, as well as and give kids the chance to stay connected and maintain relationships with their peers. Students' mental health is also a priority for the program. The program has remained on call to address any mental health concerns of their students, providing a safe outlet to express concerns regarding abuse or neglect in their home. This summer, the Boys & Girls Club of Parkersburg is offering programming that will include a mix of academic enrichment, sports and fitness, and STEM.

Conclusion

As the country looks ahead to the fall, the conversation has shifted from reacting to the extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic to rethinking how learning can look. Schools, afterschool programs, and community partners will need to come up with new solutions related to timing, space, and staffing to ensure that all kids' educational, health, and social and emotional needs are being met. Additional resources will be needed from federal, state, and local governments as expenses for programs and schools will rise to implement health and safety protocols, such as purchasing cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment.

Although the pandemic has had a devastating impact worldwide, it also presents our country with the opportunity to re-envision how learning can happen, as well as encourage schools and community-based groups to establish new and strengthen existing partnerships as the country navigates through the current economic, health, and educational challenges, and the challenges that lie ahead as we recover from this health crisis.

"...we need to acknowledge and address the inequity and trauma of this current pandemic crisis before we can expect learning to resume as usual."

— American Institutes of Research³⁹



70 percent of afterschool program providers report serving students in some capacity since the pandemic hit, however, due to the challenging circumstances created by the coronavirus, 84 percent are concerned that they will not be able to provide services in the fall.

Source: Online survey conducted by Edge Research between May 28-June 30, 2020 of 914 program providers on behalf of the Afterschool Alliance.

Endnotes

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