

# Reflecting Back and Looking Forward Educational Equity in the Era of COVID-19

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## About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

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## Introduction

March 16, 2021, marked the 1-year anniversary of California's statewide shelter-in-place order that prompted the forced closure of school buildings and the transition to distance learning. Issues of equity were pulled into sharp focus as the pandemic's disparate impact on the health and safety of some of our most vulnerable student populations could not be overlooked. With schools closed, students who relied on school lunches as the only meal of their day faced the prospect of losing that sole source of nourishment. Huge numbers of students lacked the electronic devices and internet connections needed to participate in virtual classrooms. And far too many lost their only safe and stable environment for learning.

Into this void stepped individual schools and school districts determined to respond to these and other fundamental student needs. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, schools organized more than 4,700 grab-and-go meal sites across the state<sup>1</sup> to replace on-site school lunches for students—and often for their families as well. School districts distributed hundreds of thousands of Chromebooks, tablets, and hot spots to ensure access to virtual instruction.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, many districts have been involved in organizing and administering COVID-19 vaccination clinics for their employees and communities. With such actions, California school districts have demonstrated nimbleness and have further highlighted the essential role they play in the care of students and their families.

Beyond these immediate needs, however, lies the more difficult and complex task of ensuring that all students have access to high-quality learning opportunities, whether instruction is delivered in person, virtually, or in a hybrid model. The pandemic has highlighted the profound inequities faced by California's low-income students and students of color, English learners, students with disabilities,

and other underserved student populations. The persistent achievement disparities across income levels and among White students, African American, and Latinx students had been well documented prior to the pandemic. After a year of school closures, remote instruction, and variable access to safe learning environments and supports to meet individual academic and social-emotional needs, early evidence suggests that the deleterious effects of the pandemic on student learning are likely to be greatest among these vulnerable student populations.<sup>3</sup>

To understand how districts have responded to these educational inequities, we focus on three systemic educational challenges that have been exacerbated during the pandemic and examine how three different districts have placed equity at the center of their response. The three challenges—ensuring that all students have access to safe and supportive learning environments, providing adequate supports to meet students’ social-emotional needs, and delivering consistently high-quality instruction—are fundamental to the educational enterprise. All three have been intensified during the pandemic, with particularly severe consequences for traditionally underserved student populations.

We chose these particular challenges and our three districts—Glendale, Sanger, and Long Beach Unified School Districts (USDs)—largely for illustrative purposes. Our goal is to demonstrate how districts in widely differing contexts can approach a range of educational challenges in ways that recognize and explicitly address disparities in opportunities and outcomes, even in the midst of a debilitating pandemic. Those disparities will not disappear as students return to physical classrooms, but the lessons provided by these districts’ responses during pandemic conditions might inform equity strategies during recovery and into the future.

## Providing Access to Safe and Supportive Learning Environments During Distance Learning: Technology Learning Pods in Glendale

Glendale USD is the third-largest district in Los Angeles County, serving roughly 25,000 students. Its mission is to provide high-quality education that addresses the unique potential of each student in a safe, engaging environment.<sup>4</sup> To fulfill this mission, the district targets academic and nonacademic supports particularly for its most vulnerable students. Describing the philosophy that drives the district, Superintendent Vivan Ekchian explains that equity is not every child receiving the same thing, but rather it is “the redirection of resources to students who need it most.” Like most districts, Glendale USD acted quickly to meet the immediate needs of targeted students and families when schools closed in spring 2020. By mid-fall, the district had distributed approximately 500,000 meals, 15,000 devices, 3,000 hotspots, and 1,200 web cameras.

Shortly after the closure, a parent survey revealed that families of essential workers had been especially impacted by lost access to school buildings and the transition to distance learning. Many families were left with few options to care for their children during work hours, as they—like many other vulnerable populations—could not afford caregivers or other childcare activities. In some cases, children of essential workers lived in crowded, multigenerational family homes that made it difficult to create conditions that fostered students’ academic and social-emotional success. Few families of essential workers could provide academic supports for distance learning, and most families lacked access to the social capital or



networks needed to organize the kinds of learning pods that many economically advantaged parents across the state had employed.<sup>5</sup>

Recognizing this need, Glendale USD leaders resolved that the district should act, but they still had to determine the best way to do so safely and effectively. Their chosen strategy was to use the district's longstanding summer childcare program—which was not subject to statewide closures and therefore offered one of the first opportunities to host on-campus activities—as a pilot for in-person academic instruction when conditions allowed. With the lessons gained from the summer childcare pilot, Glendale USD scaled their in-person safety protocols in school buildings districtwide as they welcomed back “prioritized” students (children of essential workers, students who receive free or subsidized meals, English learners, foster youth, and children experiencing homelessness) on campus to participate in Technology Learning Pods in fall 2020.

Through these district-supported Technology Learning Pods, Glendale USD has facilitated instructional learning for prioritized students by establishing access to safe learning environments. Following standards that were consistent with guidelines from the Department of Public Health, Technology Learning Pods ensured the safety of students in person by conducting daily temperature checks, enforcing the daily use of masks, providing laptops for use in the pods, regularly cleaning and sanitizing rooms and facilities, ensuring physical distance among individuals while on campus, and maintaining 10% room and building maximum capacity. Monitored by a supervising adult or substitute teacher who could provide technology assistance, Technology Learning Pods invited targeted students back on campus to participate in the district's remote learning offerings in conducive learning environments. By the fall of

2020, Technology Learning Pods were offered in all 20 of the district's elementary schools to meet the needs for both childcare and instructional learning—a targeted attempt to reach their most vulnerable students.

Technology Learning Pods have facilitated an environment of supportive learning through fostering positive relationships for students. Glendale USD leaders understood that supportive learning environments require developmentally appropriate relationships<sup>6</sup> and observed that these were best facilitated through in-person engagement. According to Ekchian, Technology Learning Pods offered the opportunity for prioritized students to “ask questions, network with their peers, and have friends to exchange thoughts” in ways that might not have been possible at home. These opportunities allowed students not only to strengthen relationships with peers in the pods but also to develop relationships with supervising pod staff who had dedicated time to student learning. With pod staff addressing social-emotional issues in person, district leaders believed that students were better equipped to engage with content knowledge.

According to Ekchian, district intervention and district-led pods were necessary as Glendale USD leaders “could not tolerate sitting by” as students and families in their district, especially those who had lost their jobs or were at high risk of virus exposure, had limited access to safe and supportive learning environments. The goal of Technology Learning Pods was therefore to “close the opportunity gap for students' whole child support at home.” Rather than being *reactive*, the district strategized ways to be *proactive* by creating the pods as a means to provide childcare services on campus for prioritized students, thereby ensuring student safety while also engaging them in distance learning. Although Glendale USD planned to transition to hybrid learning formats in March 2021,

district leaders intend to continue offering the Technology Learning Pods to prioritized students for the remainder of the year.<sup>7</sup>

## Fostering Student Engagement and Meeting Individual Students' Social and Emotional Needs During a Pandemic: Sanger's MTSS Data-Driven Approach

Sanger USD serves more than 12,000 students in a rural, agriculturally based community in the heart of California's Central Valley. The district operates with the vision that regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, special needs, or English learner background, "all students will have the options to demonstrate what they can learn and the opportunities to be successful and achieve their dreams."<sup>8</sup> Educators in Sanger believe they can best foster equity by meeting each child's unique needs and has evolved their Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) approach to identify individual student needs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began and schools closed in response, Sanger USD, like many districts across the state, made it possible for students to access virtual classrooms by distributing technology to its students.<sup>9</sup> However, the district quickly realized that merely equipping students with technology did not guarantee learning because social-emotional and mental health issues posed another significant barrier for students. Sanger USD leaders decided they needed to address this barrier so that students could access learning opportunities.

During the pandemic, many students' learning environments have been disrupted by unreliable internet access and the trauma of facing job, food,

and housing insecurity. The students most likely to face these challenges are the 8,332 students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, the 1,894 English language learners, and the 105 foster youth in the district.<sup>10</sup> Jason Stricker, Director of Pupil Services in Sanger USD stated, "We know that [social-emotional learning] needs are really substantial. No matter what target groups students are in, keeping students connected and engaged was going to be a heavy lift." District leaders leaned into what they were already doing to meet students' needs: collect and monitor data to identify gaps and implement solutions as part of their MTSS and continuous improvement framework.

Sanger USD leaders decided to target student engagement as an indicator of students' social-emotional and mental health and began to examine attendance data while maintaining open lines of communication with families. Stricker shared, "Since March 2020, the key piece for us has been communication in partnership with parents through this pandemic journey. [I]t has been teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, [and] counselors really stepping forward to build that connection." Additionally, by keeping track of attendance data, the district identified students who were not signing into class and used this as a measure of engagement.

To reach students who were not attending class regularly, the district made socially distanced home visits to understand why. By investigating the barriers that kept students from attending their virtual classrooms, the district could target its supports where needed. For example, if the barrier was technology, the district supplied the students with the technology aids to sign into class. If the barrier was physical and students didn't have a quiet space or desk from which to work, the district loaned them a desk. If the barrier was social-



## MTSS in Sanger USD

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a whole-school, data-driven prevention-based framework in which Sanger USD district leaders and teachers provide a continuum of supports to address varying academic and behavioral needs. When Sanger USD landed in the bottom 2% of districts in the state based on student performance in 2004, the district began making strategic changes to create a systems approach to identify and meet the learning needs of all students. These changes evolved into a districtwide MTSS approach through which the district seeks to equitably provide opportunities to identify student needs and to provide differentiated supports to meet those needs. According to Ada Wolff, Program Coordinator in Sanger USD, “I think our MTSS framework is set up to allow every level in the system to ask questions from the data. At the PLC level, they are asking ‘What do we want the student to learn? What are we doing if they’re not learning?’ At the district level we’re looking at the data system-wide and going back and asking, ‘What’s happening here and how can we support that?’ The data points and ongoing conversations really allow us to address the equity issues that are always present.”

For more information on Sanger and MTSS, please see [One System for All: A Multi-Tiered System of Supports in Sanger Unified School District](#).<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Massengale, C., Choi, L., O’Day, J., & Knudson, J. (2020). *One system for all: A multi-tiered system of supports in Sanger Unified School District*. California Collaborative on District Reform. [https://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA\\_Collaborative\\_Sanger\\_MTSS.pdf](https://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA_Collaborative_Sanger_MTSS.pdf)

emotional and students were too overwhelmed with personal issues such as food insecurity and low motivation to log into school, the district provided the students with meals and additional supports. By examining the data to identify barriers and determine where targeted supports were needed, Sanger leaders were able to better address students’ individual needs.

Another piece of data Sanger district leaders examined was students’ grades. As they monitored fall 2020 distance learning data, they found a higher percentage of students with Ds and Fs than in previous semesters. Sanger USD leaders attributed this finding in part to mental and emotional health, understanding that students cannot access meaningful curriculum and instruction if they are experiencing anxiety because their parents have lost their jobs, if they don’t know where their next meal is coming from, if they are embarrassed to show their home life on the computer screen, or if they are struggling with the motivation to care and find meaning in school.

Lower motivation and grades were unsurprising to district leaders; the threats to equity were alarming as the increase in falling grades was most pronounced among students who struggled the most even more before the pandemic. Therefore, the district worked with teachers to engage in more flexible and equitable grading policies to ensure that the focus was on engagement and social-emotional health during these difficult times.

Sanger USD leaders attribute their ability to pivot and assess students’ needs during distance learning to their preexisting MTSS framework. The pandemic is affecting all students in ways the district could not even predict, both advantaged students and traditionally underserved students. The practice of examining data student-by-student to identify gaps in access and learning is one the district feels advances their equity goals because each child can get the attention and services they need. According to Superintendent Adela Jones, “Since we started up again, we’ve been able to get a lot of our [social-emotional learning] systems back

in place in a similar way as we were in person so when a child needs someone, they know how to get access to them. The kids are now reaching out to the teachers, and psychologists, and counselors.... We are pulling out all the stops to be creative and try everything to keep our connection to the kids and the families.”

## Ensuring Access to Quality Teaching and Differentiated Instruction in Virtual Settings: Long Beach USD’s Partnership With Khan Academy

As the third largest school district in California, Long Beach USD serves 72,000 students and features a teaching force of roughly 3,200 teachers. District leaders operate with a foundational belief that all students and communities come with cultural and linguistic assets and deserve to be treated with dignity, fairness, respect, and unconditional positive regard. In a warm and demanding learning environment, students can learn and achieve at high levels and have responsibility for their own success. Efforts to eliminate disparities in opportunities and outcomes among subgroups of students has been a long goal in Long Beach USD. These equity-motivated efforts have taken the form of a range of targeted initiatives aimed at groups of students who have not experienced opportunities and outcomes commensurate with those of their more advantaged peers.

Difficult to achieve under any conditions, equity has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. The pandemic has introduced profound disruptions in learning, and the ongoing sense of crisis and uncertainty has made it difficult to continue business as usual, let alone attend to

the intensified needs of vulnerable students and their families. During a pandemic, Superintendent Jill Baker shared, “It would be so easy to get on a path away from equity because all the problems associated with COVID-19 are overwhelming.”

Nevertheless, while meeting immediate needs of students and their families by distributing more than 30,000 Chromebooks and 7,000 hot spots to families, Long Beach USD district leaders turned their attention to solving two instructional problems. First, they wanted to find ways to meet students’ varying learning needs through differentiated instruction during distance learning. Second, they wanted to ensure that students, regardless of socioeconomic status or racial ethnicity, had access to high-quality teaching, a challenge that was exacerbated by distance learning because many teachers did not have the technical training or pedagogical skills to adapt their instruction to the virtual medium. To attack both these problems, the district extended an existing body of work with Khan Academy.

Differentiated instruction has long been a priority for Long Beach USD, and a district partnership with Khan Academy that began in 2017 was a useful vehicle for implementing differentiation. Long Beach USD’s work to intentionally weave Khan Academy resources and online lessons into the classroom began several years before the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to distance learning. It is through this preexisting partnership that the district was able to take resources that had been vetted for quality and place them into the hands of district teachers to help them differentiate instruction in a virtual environment.

The partnership with Khan Academy was initially intended to supplement the traditional in-person classroom experience. However, because the district already had access to Khan Academy



## Differentiating Instruction Through Online Learning

Differentiating instruction is one key to an equitable approach to instruction because it involves making learning content accessible to all students by “meeting them where they are.” Nader Twal, Program Administrator in the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development in Long Beach USD shared an example of how teachers use Khan Academy resources in a traditional in-person classroom to differentiate instruction:

If a teacher gives the Unit 5 math assessment and sees that some students did not master certain concepts and skills, the teacher might choose to reteach certain concepts. But not all students need to be retaught the same concepts and skills. Using Khan Academy lessons, the teacher can tailor student plans and meet varying student needs by assigning different modules and assignments to different students individually. The teacher can then use the data to monitor student progress and offer in-person support to students who are struggling. For students who are ready to move on to the next unit, the teacher can assign a module to accelerate their learning.

lessons online, it was easy for teachers to incorporate the Khan resources into their lessons during distance learning. The district offered 80 webinars in a 3-week span that reached more than 1,000 teachers per week during the spring of 2020—some of which offered professional development for using Khan Academy resources virtually. The district found that more teachers were actively incorporating resources from Khan Academy during distance learning than they were prior to distance learning. The percentage of teachers who activated their Khan accounts grew from 33% to 84% between February and October 2020, while the percentage of students who activated their accounts grew from 52% to 71% over the same period. Nader Twal, program administrator in the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, shared that teachers were using the Khan resources to assess where learning gaps exist, reinforce skills, accelerate some students, and bring some students to grade level.

The partnership with Khan Academy continued to evolve when Sal Khan approached the district in spring 2020 and asked the district to pilot Schoolhouse.world. The premise behind this pilot program was to pair the most skilled teachers in

the district with any student in the district. When schools closed their doors and teachers had to shift to teaching virtually, some teachers were not immediately comfortable or adept at using the technology to deliver instruction. With this in mind, Sal Khan’s idea was to give all students in Long Beach USD—regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity—access to high-quality instruction from teachers in the district who were both technologically comfortable and pedagogically strong using a distance learning platform.

The district gathered a group of 50 teachers to create 20-minute microsessions targeting certain skills within units of study. Students could access these resources at any time, even if the teacher was not assigned to their class or school. A student could take a skills assessment, download a skills report, and go to Schoolhouse.world to see which teachers in the district were offering sessions around skills in which they needed more support. During the spring of 2020, more than 500 Long Beach USD students signed up in the Schoolhouse.world platform for personalized support, and hundreds more received support.<sup>11</sup> After piloting the program with Long Beach USD in the spring, Sal Khan implemented it worldwide to connect

students to expert instructional support during the global school shutdown. Long Beach USD plans to continue to utilize the program even after distance learning ends because the district recognizes that it not only provides greater access to support and instruction but also fortifies students' sense of agency.

The effects of COVID-19 in Long Beach USD are a reality the district cannot ignore; at the same time, the inequities in education for historically underserved students are also realities the district cannot ignore. For district leaders in Long Beach, continuing to strategize and find ways to provide all students with access to quality learning opportunities is central to the district's agenda, even during a pandemic.

## Lessons Learned

Three themes emerged across these district examples that may inform other districts as they seek to respond equitably to challenges brought on and exacerbated by the pandemic.

### COVID-19 Disruptions Provide an Opportunity for Innovation and Outside-the-Box Thinking

In times of uncertainty and disruption, district leaders may face (or even create) pressure to return to "normalcy." However, the practices that feel familiar and comforting to educators and students might be those that have failed our most vulnerable students for decades. In the face of practices that often seem too deeply entrenched to uproot, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated unique opportunities for innovation and creative problem-solving. These opportunities may challenge traditional roles and practices in schools and school systems and may therefore lead to solutions

that are more effective in meeting the needs of historically underserved students. According to Superintendent Ekchian, "Now is the time for innovation and we should celebrate that. Although we didn't ask for a pandemic, and certainly would have preferred a calmer nation, the turbulence has allowed us to see the beauty of the waves."

During the pandemic, Glendale USD challenged conceptions of how school space and resources might be used and adopted health and safety precautions within school buildings to offer districtwide Technology Learning Pods. In Sanger USD, the loss of traditional sources of evidence prompted district leaders to employ home visits as a strategy for learning about individual student needs. Long Beach USD took the opportunity presented by the pandemic to think creatively about access to quality teachers. In each case, district leaders have been forced to address challenges in new ways. As these challenges fade away with progress toward vaccination and transitions back to in-person schooling, local districts do not need to return to the way things were done before. Now is the time to imagine new solutions to our new and persistent problems.

### Building on Existing Work Enables Districts to Address Equity Problems

At a time when educators at all levels of the system are challenged by the pandemic, they have had little precedent to guide their actions. Building on existing practices can allow for innovation while equipping educators to make progress without inventing something new. Put another way, these districts leveraged existing structures and modified existing strategies and partnerships to tackle rising challenges. Moreover, by integrating approaches to advance equity into established structures and cultures, district leaders can increase the likelihood





that those approaches will be implemented—especially by educators that have limited bandwidth to do so.

Glendale, Sanger, and Long Beach USDs provide examples of building on existing work to lay the foundation for addressing equity concerns during crises. Amidst the pandemic, district leaders in Glendale USD used their long-standing summer childcare program to pilot in-person safety protocols, thus paving the way for instituting Technology Learning Pods for prioritized students in 2020–21. Similarly, Sanger USD’s existing culture of rigorous data collection as part of its overall MTSS approach allowed the district to diagnose and respond to students’ social and emotional needs during distance learning. In Long Beach USD, leaders leveraged their partnership with Khan Academy to ensure that all students and teachers had access to quality teaching and learning resources during school closures.

Other California districts may face different challenges and will necessarily have to respond to differing contextual conditions. Nevertheless, by considering their district’s unique strengths, leaders in other school systems can accelerate the development and implementation of new approaches that address both persistent and emerging needs. As districts confront continuing barriers to opportunity and success, leveraging their existing commitments to equity may be especially important to addressing the root causes of systemic injustices.

### Using Evidence to Evaluate New Strategies Advances District Efforts in Continuous Improvement

Because the pandemic introduced a high level of uncertainty into the work districts do and because many districts have responded by implementing

innovative and creative solutions, the outcomes that can result from new approaches are themselves uncertain. It is therefore important for districts to actively seek and use evidence to evaluate strategies through a lens of both equity and continuous improvement. By reflecting on their progress and lessons learned, district leaders can refine, adapt, and capitalize on promising practices while also improving in areas of challenge.

The example of Sanger USD demonstrates the importance of an iterative cycle of data use for continuous improvement in districts seeking to improve educational equity. By monitoring attendance and assessment data in real time, district and school leaders in Sanger could attend to students’ specific needs. The district capitalized on its robust system of data collection and review practices to facilitate productive conversations during data team meetings. Districts could implement new approaches as needed and evaluate their effectiveness thereby fostering continuous improvement. Other district leaders might likewise look for ways to collect and monitor data as circumstances change to best meet the individual needs of their most vulnerable students.

## Conclusion

A year into school closures and distance learning, plans to reopen schools across the state are well underway. District leaders, principals, teachers, and communities have an opportunity to leverage their crisis-motivated responses and lessons systemwide to develop more effective and equitable strategies moving forward. Educators and students are not the same as they were a year ago, and schools should not return to the way they were. The pandemic highlighted and further exacerbated the inequities that existed within the system for low-income students, students of color, and other vulnerable

student populations; thus, a return to normal would ignore students who need supports the most. Students' academic progress, social-emotional well-being, and mental health will require continued attention to address the disparities that predated the COVID-19 pandemic and have expanded since its inception. As districts gear up for various forms of in-person learning this spring, plan for summer programming, and create structural, lasting changes in the fall, the experiences of Glendale, Sanger, and Long Beach USDs can be instructive.

First and foremost, these examples point to the importance of explicit and consistent attention to equity through both universal and targeted strategies. They also suggest that taking advantage of disruption to try new things, building on existing strengths to improve responsiveness and the likelihood of success, and engaging in a process of continuous improvement surrounding new ideas can produce meaningful progress that can help all students thrive.

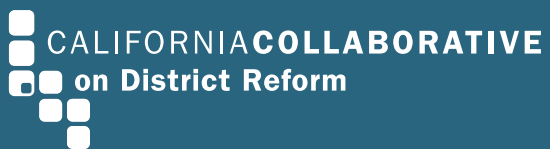


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The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California’s urban school systems.

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