



# COVID-19, RACE AND SCHOOLS:

Addressing Equitable Learning Conditions  
for Our Students



# Abstract

Communities In Schools (CIS™) recognizes this critical moment in U.S. history: the confluence of historical and present inequities in our communities and the social, economic, and educational disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Black, Brown, and Indigenous students and students living in poverty are experiencing a differentiated set of impacts of national crises.

This moment calls for schools, non-profits, businesses, governments, and communities to embrace a conversation around shifting the educational paradigm toward reengagement, equitable learning environments, and a school climate that benefits and supports ALL students.

Beyond the physical needs of students and families, social and emotional supports are necessary for student reengagement.

The CIS™ model of integrated student supports can help schools address the local factors contributing to disengagement and inequitable learning.

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## The Situation: One Pandemic, Disparate Impacts

*“Here’s the reality...structural racism [is] the pre-existing condition that [has] destined us to be where we are—where our communities of color are disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus. We shouldn’t be shocked.”*

**Vicky Pringle**, Vice President, National Education Association (NEA)<sup>1</sup>

During a pandemic that upended all aspects of American life, more than 50 million school children lost access to school buildings during the final months of School Year 2019–20, interrupting their learning and further disrupting home and community life. Food insecurity, challenges with distance learning, and lack of access to health care hit families hard and fast, with a disproportionate impact on Black and Brown students, Indigenous students, and students living in poverty. Anxiety and trauma were not far behind as communities grappled with the fallout from school closures. As the new school year starts around the country, we are just beginning to understand the range of longer-term impacts that will follow:

- An analysis by the Brookings Institution predicts students will be substantially behind academically when school resumes, particularly in mathematics, and may return to school with “more variability in their academic skills than in normal circumstances.”<sup>2</sup>
- Stress, anxiety, grief, and trauma will likely continue. A recent survey by America’s Promise Alliance found that more than half of young people are much more concerned than usual about their physical and mental health, as well as that of their families.<sup>3</sup>
- Job loss has reached historic levels—some 48 million people lost their jobs<sup>4</sup> in the months of social distancing and shelter-in-place orders. And while record numbers of people have applied for unemployment, it’s possible many others have not applied, leaving families without resources.<sup>5</sup>

The ongoing fear of infection remains an issue for many as communities re-open after the period of social distancing. Some states have already backtracked on re-opening their economies. Schools and businesses are grappling with social distancing rules, the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff, and continued news coverage of a possible “second wave” of coronavirus infections.

Against this backdrop, we must also acknowledge that inequities existed in the nation’s schools *before* the pandemic due to institutional and structural racism and the socio-economic status of many families. Black and Brown students, Indigenous students, and students living in poverty are often deprived of instruction, supports, and opportunities to be individually and collectively successful academically and in post-secondary life. Social isolation and economic turmoil during the pandemic have heightened awareness of these inequities, compounding them, and adding new layers of trauma, stress, and anxiety.



Finally, in their communities and on their screens, students and their families are also living through a period of national transformation. The deaths of George Floyd and many other Black Americans at the hands of police have driven an examination of our comfort with the historical institutionalization of racism, including within our education system, and its impact on Black communities. Many young people had a chance to use their voices and their agency as they joined in the calls for addressing inequities, and they will continue to demand to be heard.

Combined, the circumstances of the pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn, together with prior educational inequities and a national reckoning with institutional racism, indicate that the public education system will continue to see the disruption of many, if not all, of its norms and practices. As students return to school—in whatever form that takes—they face unprecedented challenges that impair the conditions for learning.

## The Problem: Disengagement and Dropout

The historical inequities in our public education system, the disruption and impact of the pandemic, and renewed discussions of racial justice all require us to examine how learning has been interrupted and will be, at best, uneven across race, ethnicity, language proficiency, socio-economic status and special education populations. Some of the impacts are shown in the varying levels of access families had to online resources, a time and space at home to carry out learning activities, and how connected students stayed to their teachers and peers. More will be revealed as the school year progresses. School districts are now preparing to assess and compensate for interrupted learning, cope with the real possibility of continued online education for some or all students and accelerate academic instruction for those most impacted.

One recent study in four states found that nearly nine in ten parents are worried about their children falling behind academically due to coronavirus-related school closures, ranking higher than any other financial or social-emotional concern, and that eight in ten parents say their (child)ren are experiencing heightened stress levels.<sup>6</sup> A second, national survey indicates that 59 percent of parents are concerned about their child missing important social interactions at school or with friends; the same survey revealed that 54 percent of parents feel school closures/changes will have a negative impact on their child's education.<sup>7</sup>

While preparing to address these academic challenges, school districts are also expected to address continued social distancing measures designed to curb the spread of infection from the coronavirus. As a result, the physical health and safety of students and educators is a central feature of plans for re-opening school buildings in the coming school year. A recent scan of state department of education frameworks and plans for re-starting school revealed that virtually all include recommendations related to public health safety.<sup>8</sup>

Because schools are often the heart of a community or neighborhood, their closures have added another dimension to the disruption experienced by communities, families, and students. Many may have experienced substantial emotional distress and frustration because of challenges in their home learning environments such as lack of access to technology and reliable Internet, food insecurity, or abuse. Others will have experienced grief from the loss of loved ones, or varying levels of anxiety and trauma due to economic hardship, racial injustice, protests, and other factors. In short, many of the adults and youth who have lived through these experiences will return to school in need of social-emotional supports.

### School Climate: The Link to Engagement

The combination of these factors—academic, health, social-emotional—will almost certainly dictate the overall school climate in the coming year. School climate can be described as positive or negative, and the National School Climate Council also notes the importance of a positive school climate:

*“A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school as well as the care of the physical environment.”<sup>9</sup>*

According to a recent publication from the American School Counselor Association and National Association of School Psychologists, “Addressing the academic skills gap remains an important objective; however, students will not be ready to engage in formal learning until they feel physically and psychologically safe.”<sup>10</sup>

Absent a positive school climate, schools run the risk of students disengaging, failing to attend school, and ultimately dropping out entirely. Over the last thirty years, research has shown that school climate impacts both physical and mental health, making it a key contributor to the conditions for learning. One review by the National School Climate Center and Fordham University<sup>11</sup> found:

- Evidence supports impact of school climate on students' mental health, physical health, and academic achievement.
- School climate is associated with decreased absenteeism and lower suspension rates.
- School climate can prevent social and emotional violence (i.e., bullying).
- School climate has a positive impact on motivation to learn.
- School climate fosters learning via the promotion of cooperative learning, trust, and respect.
- School climate has been shown to mitigate the negative impact of poverty on academic success.
- Feeling of connectedness is a critical mediator of the impact of school climate on academic performance.

The need to provide a positive school climate is especially important for students of color. Black youth face more—and stricter—disciplinary actions in schools.<sup>12</sup> Children of color and English language learners are more likely to report that school is not a welcoming environment where they feel a sense of belonging.<sup>13</sup> The Learning Policy Institute has cited additional research that expounds on these findings:

*“The way students are treated in school—or in society outside of school—can trigger or ameliorate social identity threat, which can affect members of groups that have been evaluated negatively in society—for example, on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, income, sexual identity, disability status, or gender. Because American schools exist within a societal climate that perceives—and misperceives—people in racial*

*and ethnic terms, stereotype threat in the classroom is often powerfully experienced by students of color. This fear of being judged in terms of a group-based stereotype induces stress that impairs working memory and focus, leading to poorer performance on school tasks.”<sup>14</sup>*

A research synthesis by the University of Chicago described engaging students in learning as “an educator’s most important task.”<sup>15</sup> Describing engagement as essential to reaching equity goals, the same synthesis offered three components of engagement:

- **Behaviorally**—students are doing academic work (attending class, completing assignments, processing material with peers)
- **Emotionally**—students are interested and feel connected to the work they are doing
- **Cognitively**—students are actively focused on learning and working diligently to master new skills and knowledge

Engagement can be disrupted by external factors, and “the consequences of disengagement are more significant for students from families with fewer resources...”<sup>16</sup> Even in normal times, barriers and inequities such as those described above can impact individual students, leading to problems with attendance, behavior, and academic achievement. Students with physiological, safety, and social-emotional needs are at higher risk of disengagement, poor academic performance, and dropping out of school entirely.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the magnitude of the challenges present in this moment, including the disproportionate impacts on students of color due to institutional racism, the affects felt by many students are expected to be more pronounced as schools navigate how to deliver learning and support to families in this and upcoming school years. In a national survey conducted in May 2020,



America’s Promise Alliance found that 29 percent of students currently do not feel connected to their school.<sup>18</sup> Without careful planning, it is possible students, finding their schools without the necessary—and equitable—conditions for their learning will disengage from school.

Schools will no doubt take varying approaches to the new year, but all will need to address school climate and supports for how learning happens. Regardless of the entry point or duration of effort, the practice of reengagement is required for all approaches and all locations that are part of where learning happens—because it focuses on the needs of the student first.

## The Solution: Reframe Educational Equity

Prioritizing student engagement will become the critical driver of cultivating more equitable school climates in the coming school year and beyond. We know that with children and youth, as with people of all ages, one approach does not work for all; we cannot assume to know how students are returning to school and whether they have had positive or negative experiences during the past several months. As school systems try to maximize learning during and after the pandemic and to reengage the school community, understanding and accommodating the individualities of the youth they serve will be even more essential than before. This will require rigorous attention to breaking down barriers to equitable learning that existed before—and have been exacerbated by—the health crisis.

Equitable conditions for learning must place students at the center of a network of caring, trained adults inside schools and at home. The nation’s state education leaders have released guidance that focuses on this as a core principle of reopening schools: “Organize people, time, and technology to include increased support in the areas of learning recovery, relationships, and social-emotional support.”<sup>19</sup> Physiological needs (food, clothing, shelter) must be met, AND we must attend to safety needs related to the coronavirus and fears of infection, AND schools must have the people, policies, and practices needed to instill a sense of belonging. Only in this way will schools reengage with students and keep them on track academically.

The same can be said for meeting the needs of adults in the system, who experienced the same disruption young people did when school buildings closed, and social distancing was instituted. Attention must be paid—and resources dedicated to—providing supports and safe spaces for teachers and non-instructional staff. Districts and their community partners also need to provide training across a spectrum ranging from self-care to identification of trauma and delivery of or referral to trauma-informed care practices and programs. We also cannot overlook the history of institutional racism in schools, nor the very real emotional toll and trauma caused by the recent deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police which has driven protestors into the streets.

Outside of the school building itself, many parents, guardians, and caretakers will struggle to maintain active engagement in their child’s education while navigating the economic and

health challenges resulting from the pandemic. Parent and family engagement will be critical to both ensuring a positive school climate, but also in addressing the wide-ranging sets of needs our students have when re-entering school. Supports for students, especially in the wake of the pandemic, must also extend into the home with structured and intentional family supports.<sup>20</sup> This includes equipping parents, guardians and caretakers with the necessary information to make decisions for their child in support of their learning and academic success. Additionally, creating space within the school environment where parents and families have opportunity to express concerns, support student engagement and lift up their voices will be critical to ensuring a coordinated, community-wide effort to tackle the many challenges within the education arena, from learning access to equitable student outcomes.

The goal must be to ensure **equitable conditions for learning** in all schools, with students at the center, surrounded by a caring community with access to all necessary resources. This work must consider the adverse impacts of poverty on learning, confront historical inequities for Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, and meet the purpose of establishing long-term conditions for equitable learning. An equitable learning environment operates within a school climate model that integrates the ways in which parents and families, teachers, community partners, and non-instruction staff work together to support students.

The coming together of **leadership, curriculum and instruction, whole child supports, and community and family engagement** integrates supports and services including academic instruction, social emotional learning and caring relationships, mental health and trauma-informed care, and engagement and inclusion in service of the needs of all students (see *Figure 1*). In turn, these supports will foster equitable conditions for learning that must be part of a positive school climate.

The nation must rise to meet these challenges, including with new funding and careful coordination of programs and practices. Schools are being asked to invent whole new methods for handling the core logistics of academic instruction and student supports—from distance learning to providing personal protective equipment to changing class-times to establishing new transportation schedules and methods and rethinking what attendance means. In the same way that academic assessment, curriculum, and instruction practices will change, so will student support initiatives such as health clinics, food programs, and time/activities outside the classroom. This will continue for 12-18 months with longer-term impacts on the school building for several years. It is critical that *all* these changes in practice be grounded in caring relationships and a means of inter-disciplinary and cross-agency coordination, developed and implemented with an equity lens.

## Factors Influencing Equitable Learning Conditions



Figure 1: Equitable Conditions for Learning

## The Strategy: Integrated Student Supports

In its guidance document, *Restart & Recovery: Conditions for Teaching and Learning*, the Council of Chief State School officers outlines a multi-tiered system of supports as key to student well-being and connection.<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, one logical mechanism for creating equitable conditions for learning is a school-based, student-centered system of integrated student supports. According to Child Trends:

*“Integrated student supports (ISS) are a school-based approach to promoting students’ academic success by developing or securing and coordinating supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement. These resources range from traditional tutoring and mentoring to provision of a broader set of supports, such as linking students to physical and mental health care and connecting their families to parent education, family counseling, food banks, or employment assistance. While ISS programs take many forms, integration is key to the model—both integration of supports to meet individual students’ needs and integration of the ISS program into the life of a school.”<sup>22</sup>*

As the nation’s leading provider of integrated student supports, Communities In Schools (CIS) is uniquely positioned to assist in creating equitable conditions for learning by virtue of the fact its trained staff already work directly with school personnel. The role of CIS site coordinators, and the use of a model that is driven by needs assessment, community asset mapping, and data-driven case management processes, demonstrates that CIS can contribute to the necessary conditions for learning. Even in a distance learning environment, site coordinators can “be there” for students and families.

Throughout the CIS network, site coordinators have adapted and responded to living under various health restrictions with a renewed focus on building, strengthening, and maintaining relationships with students and families. While still relying on evidence-based practice, local affiliates have adapted delivery methods and applied the same personalized care and “whatever it takes” approach to integrating resources into school and family life. Using digital platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom and Facebook, site coordinators established critical “check-ins” to ensure students are healthy and safe. CIS was also able to support teachers during virtual instruction to identify disengaged students and conduct follow-up on a one-on-one basis to identify any engagement barriers. Site coordinators are navigating existing resources to support families—from running food delivery routes to working side-by-side with students’ parents and guardians as they access social services, unemployment filings and finding affordable physical and mental health services, while helping students, parents, and teachers navigate new technology platforms for learning.

The components of reengagement require integration among all the stakeholders and actors who surround and support students, something well within the CIS wheelhouse. Whether in-person, online, or through a hybrid form of blended learning—students in the building part-time, learning from home part-time—or if school buildings are closed on a periodic/rolling basis due to spikes in



coronavirus infections and the need for continued social distancing, CIS has the experience to broker services and supports in-school and at-home.

The CIS model of integrated student supports lends support to district and building leaders concerned about achievement gaps, attendance, behavior, and overall student well-being. Indeed, the model remains applicable—perhaps even more so—in the current situation. With enhancements tailored to the specific needs of a disengaged population returning to disrupted school environments, the model will be even more valuable to schools and districts seeking the best possible outcomes for all students. As demonstrated during the recent period of school building closures, integrated student supports can be adapted to in-person, online, and hybrid education models. As schools focus on mitigating infection, accelerating academic gains, and addressing new levels of anxiety and trauma, relationships and social-emotional competencies will remain key ingredients in the overall conditions for student success.

### The Call to Action: Redefine Our New Normal

The challenges—and opportunities—of restarting school require a coordinated effort by many stakeholders to meet the moment and encourage schools, districts, and communities to recognize that a “return to normal” may do more harm than good. Business as usual will get us back where we were before the pandemic: a system fraught with inequity and disparity.

Rather, through the process of reengagement, education can be renewed and revitalized. This will mean an increased focus on social and emotional learning, supporting adults in the school building, raising student voices, engaging parents and community members, addressing whole-child needs, and, most importantly, confronting the historic and present inequities that have been laid bare by this pandemic and the recent acts of violence against Black communities.

We realize that the path forward requires a new set of approaches to learning. Communities In Schools stands ready to support school leaders and educators in responding to the unprecedented challenges before us.

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