



California  
Charter Schools  
Association

December 2020  
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# How California's Charter Schools Supported Students' Social and Emotional Needs

The Transition to Distance Learning Amid COVID-19  
Portrait of the Movement — 4th Installment



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The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) is a nonprofit organization that seeks to meet parent, educator, and community need for great public school options by supporting and advocating for high quality non-profit charter schools and sharing their success throughout California’s public schools.

As part of California’s public school system, charter schools are helping to advance issues of equity, opportunity and access. Charter schools serve all students, all families, and all communities, with particular urgency to provide the state’s most historically underserved and vulnerable students with a high-quality public education.

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**California Charter Schools Facts**

**Charter schools are:**

- Public, free, non-profit and open to all
- More flexible than traditional public schools (i.e. staffing and spending)
- Held accountable for student outcomes

**In 2019-20:**

- **1,310** California charter schools served **675,374** students

**• Student Demographics**

Low-income	59%
Latinx	52%
White	27%
English learners	15%
Students with disabilities	10%
African American	7 %

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## SUMMARY

The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) knows families are increasingly concerned about their child's learning loss during the pandemic. Along with protecting the health and safety of students and staff, CCSA recognizes the crucial importance of children's social and emotional well-being. We understand that for many, distance learning has been a challenge, particularly for the most vulnerable and historically underserved student populations.

As such, the final installment of CCSA's *Portrait of the Movement 2020* series focuses on how charter schools are supporting students' social and emotional needs as more children and teenagers experience emotional distress, hunger, and loneliness.

In recognition of the sobering statistics, California charter schools acted swiftly in the spring of 2020 to launch a variety of initiatives to support the social and emotional needs of students, families, and their surrounding communities. This included meal provision programs that helped prevent food insecurity during a period of widespread hunger.

While many charters are stepping up to provide a range of resources, CCSA highlights CORE Butte Charter School as a bright spot in California for its focus on combating social and emotional distress among its 800 students.

CORE Butte is a nonclassroom-based K-12 charter school that offers support classes at sites in the Chico and Paradise areas. Parents and community members say CORE Butte's tailored supports for individual students, as well as its deep and meaningful relationships with students, families, and staff, has helped keep students safe and healthy – both emotionally and physically.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This is the fourth and final installment of CCSA's *[Portrait of the Movement 2020](#)* series which focuses on how charter schools transitioned to remote learning in 2020. In this four-part series, CCSA explores four different challenges associated with remote learning and the pandemic. Using literature review, survey results, and interviews with charter school leaders, we show how California's charter schools used their flexibility and innovation to maintain their focus on quality and equity during COVID-19 and the transition to remote learning. [See Appendix](#) for methodology and key terms.

## The Problem: Social and Emotional Distress

Many students **suffered emotionally** and/or **socially** during spring 2020

The pandemic disrupted life as we knew it during spring 2020, and many students felt this change deeply. The stress of the pandemic, remote learning, and parental job loss increased the need for student mental health services.<sup>i</sup> In fact, 32 percent of students who did not receive mental health services prior to the pandemic reported that they needed help in the spring of 2020.<sup>ii</sup> California students reported feeling **lonely, bored, overwhelmed,** and **anxious** when surveyed in the spring after transitioning to distance learning. About a quarter (23 percent) of surveyed California K-12 students rated their mental wellness state at three or less out of 10, a level that, by the California Association of School Counselors' standards, requires **immediate action**.<sup>iii</sup>

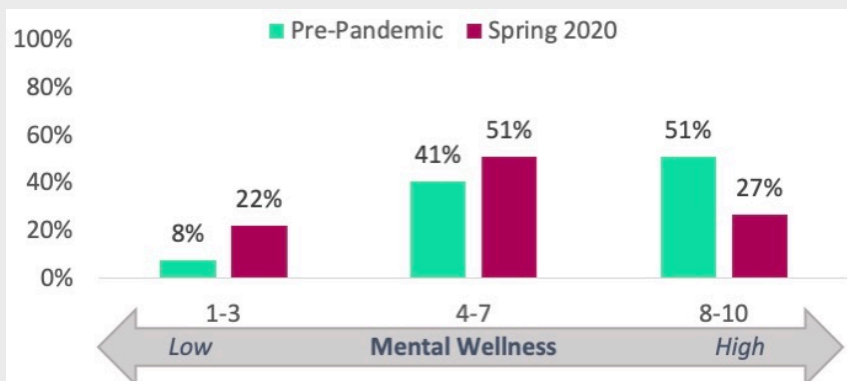
Without school-based health clinics and/or access to private spaces for virtual counseling, many of these students could not get the support they needed. In March 2020, between 60-70 percent of school-based health clinics were closed, cutting off access to hundreds of thousands of California's students.<sup>iv</sup> The longer students were out of school, the more likely they were to suffer emotionally, with elementary and middle school students **more likely** to experience negative impacts.<sup>v</sup> That being said, teens were also hit hard by the pandemic. The majority of teens (seven out of 10) reported struggling with their mental health during spring 2020 – over 50 percent had anxiety, 45 percent felt exceedingly stressed, and 43 percent were depressed.<sup>vi</sup>

The pandemic **disproportionately harmed** the social and emotional well-being of historically **underserved students**.

The psychological and economic impacts of the pandemic were generally felt **more acutely** by historically underserved students and their families. In the spring, Black and Latinx adults and children were dying from COVID at **double the rate**

of white adults in some places.<sup>viii</sup> It was therefore more likely that Black and Latinx students would be directly impacted by COVID. These students, especially Latinx students whose parents did not go to college, were also **more likely** to have a parent who lost their job during shelter-in-place.<sup>ix</sup>

**Figure 1:** CA students' self-reported mental wellness on a scale of 1-10 (low mental wellness to high mental wellness) prior to and during the pandemic.<sup>vii</sup>



With job losses and uncertainty came **unprecedented levels of child hunger**. Fourteen percent of California families with children reporting having insufficient food during the spring of 2020.<sup>x</sup> Again, the likelihood of

experiencing hunger varied by race/ethnicity, as Black families were **five times more likely** than white families to lack access to food during the spring.<sup>xi</sup>

Students with disabilities felt the impacts of the pandemic in a variety of ways. Students with neurological and learning differences can find change and inconsistency stressful, and many struggled to adapt to remote learning.<sup>xii</sup> Distance learning had some positive impacts for students with autism spectrum disorders, as online learning can be more visually supportive, organized, repetitive, and content-focused.<sup>xiii</sup> Even when this was the case, many of these students still depended on mental, occupational, and/or physical therapy at school but were **unable to access these services** during the spring.<sup>xiv</sup>

## The Response: How Charter Schools Supported Students

Charter schools' **flexibility** allowed them to stay attuned to and address students' **social, emotional, and physical** needs

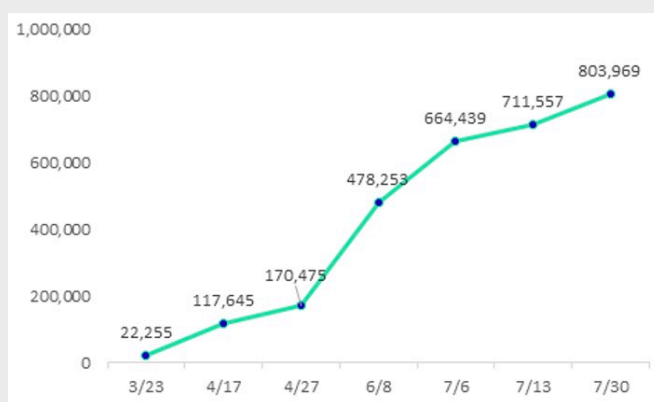
In California, charter schools are required to provide low-income<sup>±</sup> students with at least one free or reduced-price meal each school day, but they have the flexibility to implement food services programs that meet the specific nutritional needs of their students.<sup>xv</sup> This **flexibility** was key to ensuring that students **did not go hungry** during the pandemic.

In March 2020, CCSA created [a map](#) of all the schools (both charter and traditional public) **distributing free food** for students. Over the course of the spring and summer, CCSA's Los Angeles Local Advocacy team surveyed its member schools regularly about meal provision. In this survey, [Green Dot Public Schools](#) estimated that they served over 800,000 meals during the campus closures in the spring 2020 and even after school ended in the summer (See Figure 1).

In just one week, (the week of April 20), [Alliance College-Ready Public Schools](#) served roughly 67,500 meals. Several charter schools, like [Arts in Action](#) [Community Charter Schools](#) in East Los Angeles, went above and beyond to provide meals to their students and surrounding communities. Staff who had less work during remote learning, like janitorial staff, prepared and delivered meals to families who did not want to leave the house, community members who got infected with COVID, and seniors with disabilities living nearby.<sup>xvi</sup>

In addition to meal provision, charter schools **created new systems** for assessing students' needs and helping them during this challenging time. Schools like [Rocketship](#) and [Ednovate](#) launched "Care Corps," a group of staff

**Figure 2:** Green Dot Public Schools estimated total number of meals served during the 2019-20 academic year and summer.



responsible for supporting students and families. Care Corps staff reached out to students and families through a brief survey, reviewed responses, and followed up directly with families in need to help connect them to services and resources including mental health services, domestic violence assistance, and unemployment services. Rocketship staff even created a [how-to guide](#) for other schools looking to launch a Care Corps program.

## **Bright Spot: CORE Butte Charter School** Supporting the **whole student** during times of **loss** and **uncertainty**

**CORE Butte** is a nonclassroom-based K-12 charter school based in Northern California, offering a Personalized Learning Program to families who homeschool their children. The school includes a K-8 Home Study Program for students in Chico and Paradise, as well as a High School Program for teenagers in Chico.

Two years ago, CORE Butte families and educators living in Paradise lost everything when the **Camp Fire** ripped through the mountain community. The charter school lost its Paradise campus and 250 CORE Butte students and 12 staff members lost their homes.

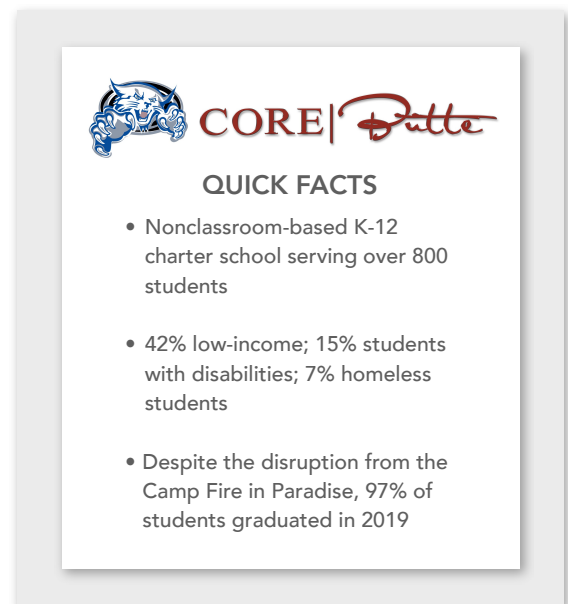
Following this tragedy, the charter school **adopted a robust approach** to address the social and emotional well-being of their students moving forward.

When Mary Cox, Executive Director of CORE Butte, first learned her school would have to pause in-person learning in the spring of 2020 due to COVID, she once again worried about the mental health of her students. She feared another shutdown – this time due to the global pandemic – would bring back all the feelings from the Camp Fire. She also worried about the social isolation of her students. “It was really important to us to that we build a way for students to feel connected to their school community,” she explained.

Indeed, CORE Butte is able to do just that using the following best practices:

### **Best Practice #1 — Offer Personalized Support & Instruction**

After the Camp Fire, CORE Butte implemented a **tiered system of support** and created a new role of Camp Fire Counselor, who was specifically hired to help students work through traumas. During shelter-in-place,



the Camp Fire counselor was booked solid and was extremely busy supporting her students.

CORE Butte also had two school psychologists and two social-emotional learning coordinators who taught mindfulness. Under the tiered system of support, as students moved up the tiers, which means they were identified as higher-risk, they received **more direct supports**. With this system already in place during spring 2020, CORE Butte administered **daily “pulse point” surveys** to students to better assess students’ needs. They found that several students who seemed fine on their Zoom calls were in actuality, struggling. With that information, a school psychologist would then reach out to those students to provide them with individual counseling and support. CORE Butte also supported its staff in this same way and had them fill out a weekly survey.

## **Best Practice #2: Foster Strong Relationships with Students, Families, and Staff**

Cox emphasized the importance of building and nurturing strong relationships with students, families, and staff to support students’ social and emotional well-being. Even though CORE Butte serves roughly 800 students, staff know each student’s unique story and background. To mitigate social isolation in the spring, **staff thought deeply** about which students had similar interests, paired them together, and fostered an online relationship between them. According to Cox, “a lot of it comes down to trust and really knowing your student, what helps them get through things, and what motivates them ... We found what makes each student tick and focused on that.”

Teachers also **doubled down** on their relationships with parents. CORE Butte already had strong relationships with its parents since under their model, parents are either the primary educators, (with the assistance of a credentialed teacher) or are highly engaged (in the case of high school students).

During the spring, CORE Butte **deepened these relationships**, especially with high school parents, by working to support parents of disengaged students and communicating with parents about meal services, supplies, and supports over their **ParentSquare portal**.<sup>xvii</sup>

## **Outcomes**

By personalizing supports and instruction and concentrating on relationships, CORE Butte supported its students and staff academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. They were on spring break when shelter-in-place started, and they were able to launch remote learning the day students returned from break. Once remote learning began, the vast majority of students stayed **fully engaged**, which likely **improved** their social and emotional well-being and kept them **progressing** academically. CORE Butte’s work to provide social and emotional support not only benefited their own students but also school districts and charter schools **throughout Butte County**. Cox discussed the “hours and hours and hours” spent supporting Butte County public school students, “We knew that, that was our gift to give, our expertise, and to be a part of a greater community, that was our role.”



## Conclusion

The pandemic impacted us all, but some felt the impacts more intensely than others. Students, especially **historically underserved students** and **students with disabilities**, were among those whose psychological well-being suffered the most. Many California charter school leaders understood this well and worked tirelessly to support their students by providing **meals**, identifying who needed **resources and supports**, and helping students, families, and staff **gain access** to the resources and supports they needed. Schools like CORE Butte helped keep students engaged in distance learning by ensuring their **social and emotional needs were met**. The charter school built upon existing support systems to **closely monitor** students' social and emotional well-being and **provide personalized supports** accordingly. CORE Butte staff also focused on building and nurturing **strong relationships** with their students, parents, and staff. As COVID rates in California continue to rise, public schools across the state can learn a lot from the ways that CORE Butte supported its students.

### Portrait of the Movement 2020 Series

In this four-part series, CCSA explores how California's charter schools used their flexibility and innovation to maintain their focus on quality and equity during COVID-19 and the transition to remote learning. Click on the links below to access each report or visit our website at [ccsa.org](https://ccsa.org) to learn more.

- **[How California's Charter Schools Mitigated Learning Loss](#)**  
*How quickly did charter schools launch distance learning programs after the statewide shelter-in-place order of March 2020? Why did some charters pivot more quickly than others?*
- **[How California's Charter Schools Adapted to Narrow the Digital Divide](#)**  
*To what extent did charter schools help students gain access to devices and the Internet so they could participate in distance learning?*
- **[How California's Charter Schools Engaged Students in Remote Learning](#)**  
*How are charter schools identifying students at-risk of falling behind, monitoring the quality of remote learning, and adjusting practices to better serve students so they are truly engaged in remote learning?*



## APPENDIX

### Methodology

CCSA surveyed its members in early April 2020 on distance learning. We received 179 responses on behalf of 409 charter schools (31 percent of all California charter schools). Survey respondents were significantly more likely to be independent charter schools, belong to a CMO/Network, employ a classroom-based model, and to serve elementary grades. Survey respondents served a more disadvantaged student demographic, on average, than non-respondents.

CCSA also interviewed representatives from four charter schools/CMOs. Interviews lasted for approximately one-hour. Interviewed schools were selected based on responses to the Distance Learning Survey. Interviewees are not representative of all California charter schools but do represent four very different schools/school systems in terms of geographic location, instructional model, grades served, and student demographics.

### Definition of Key Terms

#### LOW INCOME

**±Low-income** (California Department of Education “CDE” Definition) — Students who qualify for the federal Free/Reduced Price Lunch program.

**°Low-income** (CDE Definition) — Students who received the designation of socioeconomically disadvantaged. These are students who qualify for the federal Free/Reduced Price Lunch program or whose parents did not receive a high school diploma.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jennifer Kress** is a Director of Research on CCSA's Schools Team and leads several research projects related to equity, accountability, and school performance. She is a trained quantitative and qualitative analyst who worked at education non-profits and at a charter school management organization prior to joining CCSA. She holds a Master's in Public Policy from the University of Southern California, where she focused on education policy, and a BA from Bates College.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the many people who provided input, conducted analyses, participated in interviews, and reviewed earlier versions of this report. Erin Abshere and Elizabeth Robitaille provided vital feedback on the report's general direction in its nascent stages, the production process, and the report itself. Ellie Lawther and Jonathan Slakey both added their data expertise by running analyses, creating figures, and conducting and transcribing interviews. Ana Tintocalis jumped into a brand new role at CCSA, providing invaluable editorial and production assistance. Finally, we are especially grateful to the charter school leaders who took time out of their schedules during an incredibly chaotic time to share their insights and success stories from spring 2020. Thanks to those leaders, Vivian Price, Jesse Noonan, Mary Cox, Janine Rodriguez, Eesir Kaur, and Juan Mateos for all the important work you do for students and for your leadership throughout the pandemic. All errors are our own.



California  
Charter Schools  
Association

## Our Vision

Building great public schools of joy and rigor that prepare all California students for success in college, career, community, and life.

## Our Mission

To meet parent, educator, and community need for great public school options by supporting and advocating for high quality non-profit charter schools and sharing their success throughout California's public schools.

## Our Mission Commits Us to Equity, Opportunity and Access

While we seek to grow a movement that serves all students, all families, and all communities, we work with a special spirit of urgency to provide our most historically underserved and vulnerable students with the high quality public education they deserve.

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