California Charter Schools Association

November 2020
Jennifer Kress

How California's Charter Schools Adapted to Narrow the Digital Divide

The Transition to Distance Learning Amid COVID-19
Portrait of the Movement — 2nd Installment

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.

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 %

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

The spring of 2020 revealed just how wide the digital divide remains among public school families in California. Similar to traditional public schools, charter public schools faced a key barrier to implementing effective distance learning once the statewide shelter-in-place was ordered in March: Students generally did not have access to devices and internet connection.

Rural, low-income, Latinx, and Black students at California public schools were less likely to have access to the devices and internet connection needed to fully engage in remote learning.

Despite these challenges, charter public schools acted quickly, engaging with families to pinpoint their technological needs and allocating the appropriate resources. The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) believes there is more work to be done to ensure that all students have access, but we can learn from the creativity and flexibility of charter schools in the Golden State.

In this report, CCSA highlights Rocketship Public Schools as a bright spot in bridging the digital divide. Rocketship is a non-profit national charter school network headquartered in Redwood City, California serving roughly 6,780 students.

Rocketship Schools adapted to rapidly changing circumstances, leveraged partnerships, and deepened relationships with students, families, and staff to increase technology access and familiarity with online tools.

CCSA believes best practices emanating from Rocketship Schools can help build statewide capacity in ensuring each and every student receives a high-quality, equitable distance learning education.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

CCSA has documented the academic successes and struggles of California's public charter schools annually in its *Portrait of the Movement Annual Report*. This year, *Portrait of the Movement 2020* is comprised of **four reports** with staggered release dates beginning in November 2020. Collectively, the reports illustrate how charters in California responded to challenges brought on by the pandemic in the spring of 2020. The second installment, *How California's Charter Schools Adapted to Narrow the Digital Divide*, explores the barriers charter schools faced in implementing remote instruction. The other installments focus on: 1) preventing learning loss 2) student engagement and 3) social and emotional distress. See **Appendix** for methodology and key terms.

The Problem: The Digital Divide

Lack of access to **devices** and **internet** was a key barrier to implementing distance learning for public schools

As most teachers now know, to fully engage in high-quality remote learning, students need adequate internet connection and a device (tablet, laptop, or Chromebook). Yet, 1.5 million K-12 students in California — 25 percent of all students — did not have satisfactory **internet**, and 1.1 million students — 17 percent of all students — did not have access to a **device**.[i]

In the spring of 2020, this was an **important barrier** in efforts to launch distance learning and keep students engaged for both charter public schools and traditional public schools.
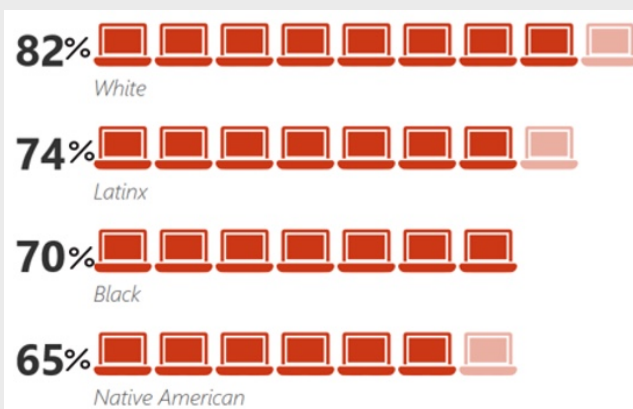
Many teachers grappled with how to engage students virtually, and 75 percent of teachers reported that students' lack of access to technology and high-speed internet was a "serious obstacle to effective implementation of remote learning."[ii] It was no surprise then that a survey of Los Angeles families found that students were more engaged in distance learning when they had access to a computer and reliable internet.[iii]

Technology access was a greater barrier for **rural**, **low-income**, and **students of color**.

Like other inequities in the education system, the lack of access to devices and internet was not a problem that was experienced equally by students attending both charter public schools and traditional public schools. Students in **rural areas** were less likely than students in **urban areas** to live in a household with an internet subscription.[iv] Access also varied by income. A spring 2020 survey of California parents found that 50 percent of **low-income families** did not have a device needed for students to participate in remote learning.[v]

Figure 1: Percentage of Households with Adequate Connectivity Nationally, by Race/Ethnicity [viii]

82% White
74% Latinx
70% Black
65% Native American

Regardless of family income, **students of color** were less likely than their **white** counterparts to have access to devices and internet. A study of households with a K-12 student in LA County found that, even after controlling for income, Black and Latinx students were significantly less likely to live in a home with a computer and internet connection.[vi] Nationally, 35 percent of Native American, 30 percent of Black, 26 percent of Latinx students were not connected to the internet compared to 18 percent of white students (See Figure 1).[vii]

The Response: How Charters Adapted to Bridge the Divide

Charter schools used their **ingenuity** to **quickly** provide devices and internet to students and **implement** quality distance learning programs

During the spring transition to distance learning, California's public schools faced an enormous challenge in quickly providing students with devices and internet. As previously stated in the **first installment** of the *Portrait of the Movement 2020* series, charter schools have more flexibility and autonomy than traditional public schools and are held accountable for student outcomes. That flexibility allowed some charter public schools to **reallocate funds** to get students **access to devices and connectivity**.[ix]

In April 2020, CCSA wanted to understand how schools were supporting students during the transition to remote learning, so we surveyed charter schools across the state and received responses from 31 percent of all California charter schools. We found that by early April 2020, just a few weeks after schools transitioned to remote learning, over half of CCSA survey respondents had already provided internet and/or devices to students. However, 30 percent of respondents still had students without devices, and the majority of respondents had students who still lacked internet access.

CCSA believes there is **more work to be done** to ensure that all students have access, but we can learn from the creativity of charter schools in the Golden State.

What follows are **several examples** of how charter schools acted quickly and strategically to provide students with internet and devices:

Collegiate Charter High School (Los Angeles, CA)
In March, Collegiate acted immediately to avoid any lost learning time. Staff delivered laptops to every student who needed them within 72 hours of implementing its distance learning program. Collegiate's operations staff worked with families to navigate barriers to technology access. The result: Each student had logged on and began receiving remote instruction in just three days.

Scholarship Prep Charter Schools (Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties) — By early April when schools were surveyed, Scholarship Prep had already provided over 700 Chromebooks and 55 hot spots to its students who attend one of three schools in Santa Ana, Oceanside and Wilmington near Long Beach.

St. Hope Public Schools (Sacramento, Ca) — St. Hope ensured each one of its families had access to the internet within just one week. This charter network operates three schools serving 1,091 students, 78 percent of whom are low-income± and 57 percent are Black.

■

Bright Spot: Rocketship Public Schools
Leveraging relationships and collaboration to bridge the divide

When **Rocketship Public Schools** first learned they would need to close their schools due to shelter-in-place, getting students access to the internet and devices they needed to access remote learning was top of mind.

Four of Rocketship's 13 Bay Area campuses are in the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District which is located in San Jose, California. In ARUSD, 26 percent of students of color and 36 percent of low-income students do not have internet at home.[x]

For its part, Rocketship **immediately distributed resources** and helped their charter public school students and families gain access to devices and internet (See Figure 2).

ROCKETSHIP
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

QUICK FACTS

- 13 classroom-based charter public K-5 schools

- Served 6,782 students of whom 76 percent were low-income and 55 percent were English learners in 2020

- High-quality schools based on **CCSA's Similar Students Rank** (SSR) with all schools performing in the top 30 percent of schools in state in 2019

Best Practice # 1 — Strong Relationships to Support Families and Staff

On March 13, the day Rocketship first learned that schools would close, staff moved swiftly to distribute every Chromebook they had to students and launched impromptu trainings on how to use platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom.

Rocketship found that building and maintaining strong relationships with students' families was key to ensuring that students had access to online learning. Staff conducted **virtual home visits with families** to check on their needs and teach them about how to use tools like Zoom. They also used **"parent camps"** at the beginning of the school year as an opportunity to teach families about the digital tools their kids would use frequently during distance learning.

Figure 2: Timeline of Rocketship's Spring 2020 Pandemic Response

| Daily COVID-19 Task Forcee Begins | Distributed food for families | Launched CareCorps | | Released Distance Learning Launchpad | | Distributed relief Funds | Rocketeers began rallying for Racial Justice |

| March 03 | March 13 | March 16 | March 25 | April 02 | April 15 | April 30 | May | May 29 |

| | Nationwide school leader training | Distance Learning begins | | Lauched Family Relief Fund | | Launched Live Teaching | Studet Participation increased to 80% |

For ongoing support, Rocketship created a **Distance Learning Launchpad** for families with resources on how to get free internet or hotspots, keep their children safe online, and find free, quality online learning programs.

Best Practice #2 — Collaboration

Through partnerships, Rocketship helped students and families gain access to the technology and devices they needed to engage in distance learning. Rocketship worked to build partnerships with **community organizations**, **telecommunications companies**, and **government programs**. For example, Rocketship partnered with the City of San Jose Library to provide 150 additional hot spots to students. They also partnered with telecommunications companies to help set up internet or hot spots for students.

Outcomes

The charter school network provided **5,600 Chromebooks** and sent learning materials home with students **before** remote instruction began in March 2020.[xi] As a result, about 95 percent of Rocketship students had devices by mid-May. Rocketship also purchased an **additional** 5,000 Chromebooks this summer to ensure that new students started the year off with technology and internet. With the devices and internet connection they needed to participate in live lessons, attendance was between 98-99 percent during the first week of the 2020-21 school year, which is **even higher** than typical in-person rates.

■

Conclusion

All California public schools faced a serious challenge in helping get students online and learning as quickly as possible during the spring of 2020. Schools needed to figure out which students had technology and internet needs, help them get access, and then troubleshoot ongoing issues. Charter schools rose to the occasion and used their **flexibility** to **act strategically** and **creatively** in their efforts to help students gain access to devices and internet during distance learning. Technology access was essential, but it was only the first step. The next step for schools was to implement quality, engaging remote instruction that kept students progressing during campus closures.

What's Next: *Portrait of the Movement 2020 Report Series* **— Upcoming Releases**

December 2020
- **Student Engagement — Focus:** How did charter schools keep students engaged and monitor the degree to which students were participating in distance learning?

- **Social and Emotional Distress — Focus:** In what ways did charter schools support students with issues related to mental health, hunger, and social isolation during the pandemic?

Previous Releases

- **Mitigating Learning Loss — Focus:** 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?

    Read the full report: *How California's Charter Schools Mitigated Learning Loss*
    To view CCSA's press release, click here.
    To read CCSA's CharterNation Blog story about the findings, click here.

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 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.

REFERENCES

[i] Chandra, S., Chang A., Day, L., Fazlullah, A., Liu, J., McBride, L., Mudalige, T., Weiss, D. (2020). Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning. Retrieved from: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_final_6_29_12-42pm_web_updated.pdf

[ii] Hamilton, L., Grant, D., Kaufman, J., Diliberti, M., Schwartz, H., Hunter, G., Messan Setodji, C., Young, C. (2020). COVID-19 and the State of K-12 Schools: Results and Technical Documentation from the Spring 2020 American Educator Panels COVID-19 Surveys. Retrieved from: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA168-1.html

[iii] Galperin, H., Aguilar, S. (2020). Equity and Justice Alert: Advocacy, Research and Policy Analysis from the Partnership for LA Schools. Retrieved from: https://partnershipla.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Equity-Alert-USC-and-P4LA.pdf

[iv] Johnson, S. & Burke, M. (2020). More California students are online, but digital divide runs deep with distance learning. Retrieved from: https://edsource.org/2020/more-california-students-are-online-but-digital-divide-runs-deep-with-distance-learning/630456

[v] Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. (2020). Governor Newsom Announced Cross-Sector Partnerships to Support Distance Learning and Bridge the Digital Divide. Retrieved from: https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/04/20/governor-newsom-announces-cross-sector-partnerships-to-support-distance-learning-and-bridge-the-digital-divide/

[vi] Galperin, H., Bar, F., Kim, A., Le, T. Daum, K. (2020). COVID-19 and the Distance Learning Gap. Retrieved from: http://arnicusc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Policy-Brief-5-final.pdf

[vii] Chandra, S., Chang A., Day, L., Fazlullah, A., Liu, J., McBride, L., Mudalige, T., Weiss, D. (2020). Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning. Retrieved from: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_final_6_29_12-42pm_web_updated.pdf

[viii] Ibid, 3.

[ix] Johnson, S. (2020). How some California charter schools support students during distance learning. Retrieved from: https://edsource.org/2020/how-some-california-charter-schools-support-students-during-distance-learning/631773

[x] Education Trust West. (2020). Education Equity in Crisis: The Digital Divide. Retrieved from: https://west.edtrust.org/resource/education-equity-in-crisis-the-digital-divide/

[xi] Vanourek, G. (2020). Schooling COVID-19: Lessons from leading charter networks from their transition to remote learning. Retrieved from: https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/schooling-covid-19-lessons-leading-charter-networks-their-transition-remote

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.

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.

Follow us @calcharters
Facebook
Twitter
Instagram
YouTube

ccsa.org