California Charter Schools Association

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How California's Charter Schools Engaged Students in Remote Learning

The Transition to Distance Learning Amid COVID-19
Portrait of the Movement — 3rd Installment

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

As we head into 2021, it is clear that distance learning will continue to be part of the daily lives of public school students in the Golden State. Moving forward, what proven strategies can teachers and school leaders employ to engage all students in distance learning? To answer this question, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) analyzed charter schools' responses to a statewide survey issued during one of the most pivotal times in public education — the spring of 2020. During this time, California required all schools to close their doors as part of a shelter-in-place order due to the pandemic and launched distance learning programs.

In April 2020, CCSA heard from many school leaders that keeping students engaged during remote learning was top of mind. At the national and state levels, educators tracked student attendance, participation, and progress in a variety of ways across schools and districts. Alarmingly, students with disabilities, English learners, and rural students were less likely to stay engaged during spring learning, potentially falling further behind.

California charter public schools combatted disengagement by using their adaptability and creativity to implement new systems, such as daily surveys and virtual dashboards, for tracking student attendance, participation, and academic progress. In this report, CCSA highlights Ednovate as a bright spot in engaging students in remote learning. Ednovate is a network of public, tuition-free, high-performing college prep high schools in Los Angeles and Orange County. The charter network maintained a 96 percent average daily attendance throughout the spring by administering daily student surveys, realigning staff roles to focus on engagement, tracking attendance and work completion, and reaching out to disengaged/struggling students. CCSA believes we can continue to learn from these best practices to help identify students at-risk of falling behind, monitor the quality of remote learning, and adjust practices to better serve students.

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 studies** 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 third installment, *How California's Charter Schools Engaged Students In Remote Learning*, explores the ways in which charters kept students engaged and tracked student progress. The other studies focus on: 1) preventing learning loss 2) bridging the digital divide and 3) supporting students' social and emotional needs. **See Appendix** for methodology and key terms.

The Problem: Online Disengagement

With students at home, many educators struggled to **monitor student engagement** and **track progress**

An increasing number of experts agree that it is difficult to deliver content virtually – especially to kids. During the start of school closures for shelter-in-place in spring 2020, many educators scrambled to track down students who had not yet signed on to remote learning to help ensure they did not fall behind. **Absences increased dramatically** in many schools and districts. For example, from March 16 to May 22, an average of 40 percent of middle and high school students in the Los Angeles Unified School District [ii] (LAUSD) were absent. To monitor absences, and more generally how students were adapting to remote learning, schools and districts needed to quickly create new systems for tracking students' attendance, engagement, and academic progress in a virtual setting.

Continuing with the LAUSD example, once the district began tracking attendance and participation in distance learning, they found that of the 60 percent of students who were present, only about a third actively [iii] participated in remote learning by logging into Schoology, LAUSD's remote learning platform. With insights like these, schools and districts could reach out to disengaged students to learn more about what supports they needed and help them get back on track.

Districts serving a large concentration of historically **underserved students** were **less likely** to enact requirements around student engagement and tracking.[iv]

Nationally, **wealthy districts** were **twice as likely** as low- and middle-income districts to require live teaching during remote learning.[v] Access to engaging remote learning and requirements around tracking also varied by urbanicity.[vi] **Rural school districts** were **less likely** than their urban/ suburban counterparts to expect teachers to take attendance, check-in with students regularly, and require progress monitoring.[vii]

Figure 1: LAUSD secondary student population and population of students who did not log onto remote learning by subgroup, April 2020[x]

Turning back to California, in LAUSD, Black and Latinx students were seven times more likely than white students to have had no interaction with teachers after schools closed for shelter-in-place and were three times less likely to have received remote instruction every day.[viii]
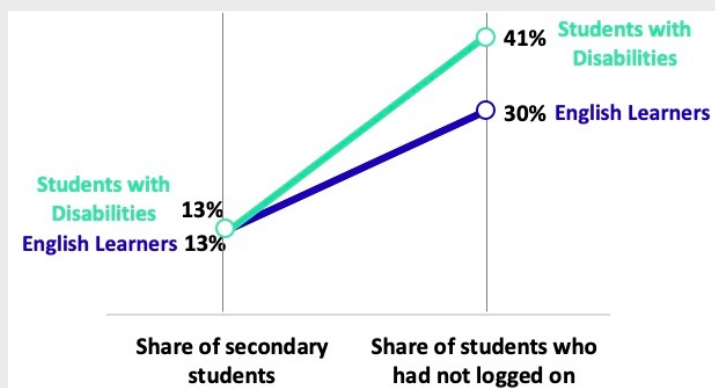
English learners and students with disabilities were also more likely to disengage from remote learning during spring 2020. In LAUSD, while only 13 percent of secondary students were English learners and only 13 percent were students with disabilities, 30 percent of the nearly 6,000 secondary students who had not yet (by the end of April) logged on to any remote learning were English learners and 41 percent were students with disabilities (See Figure 1).[ix]

The Response: How Charter Schools Engaged Students

Charter schools were **flexible** and **innovative** in their efforts to keep students engaged and track student progress.

For many educators, transitioning from in-person instruction to remote learning in spring 2020 was daunting.[xi] They had to quickly develop strategies to keep students engaged and motivated, monitor progress, and provide support from a distance. As previously stated, charter schools have more **flexibility** in **staffing** and **spending** than traditional public schools, which can make it easier to adapt to changing circumstances and implement new models, strategies, and curricula. Many charter schools used this flexibility to implement **creative strategies** for engaging students in remote learning.

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. In our previous *Portrait of the Movement 2020* reports, we showed how charter schools mitigated learning loss and helped their students gain access to the internet and devices they needed to engage in remote learning. Building off that, we wanted to understand how schools were keeping in contact with their students and monitoring academic progress.

Several respondents cited student engagement as a key challenge to remote learning implementation. School leaders voiced concern that many students were unable to focus on academics with distractions at home and/or without a designated workspace.

Surveyed leaders found that younger students had a hard time focusing and older students were often disengaged or absent. Despite these challenges, we found that in early April, **most charter schools**, 63 percent, were in contact with all their students, and **almost all**, 90 percent, of surveyed schools were in contact with at least 90 percent of their students.

Figure 2: Seven out of 10 (73 percent) of CCSA survey respondents reported they were continuing to assess their students
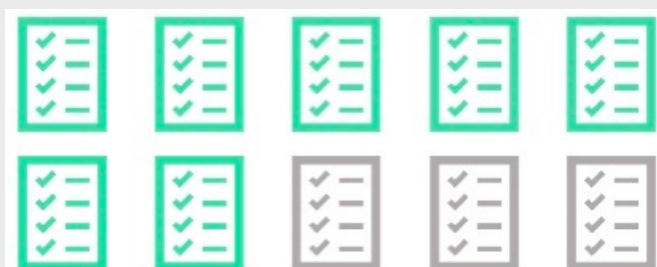
Some surveyed school leaders also struggled to track student learning. One leader wrote that one of the biggest challenges was, "Not knowing what has been accomplished or received. We can see if kids log on but not for

how long…" To combat this lack of information on academic progress and engagement, the **majority**, 73 percent, of surveyed schools continued to assess their students (See Figure 2).

Schools reported using **state assessments** like Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments (ICAs) and Assessment Blocks (IABs), as well as internal assessments like iReady, NWEA, and Lexia to better comprehend how remote learning impacted student progress. For example, ISANA Academies implemented new measures to increase participation and the validity of their internal assessments. In the spring, they conducted a **parent training series** on the importance of assessments, how to set up them up for your child, and why you should not help your child answer questions. They also **broke up the assessments** over multiple days to make sure students did not get overwhelmed and to make them more age appropriate. This also helped ensure that they were assessing students' critical thinking skills rather than their familiarity with technology.

Bright Spot: Ednovate Charter Schools
Acting **swiftly** and **strategically** to keep students engaged

When COVID hit, **Ednovate** teachers and administrators worried about supporting their students. Ednovate's six high schools in the Los Angeles area serve predominately **low-income students of color**, many of whom had parents who lost their jobs during the pandemic, could not access unemployment due to being undocumented, and/or did not have the personal experience or resources to help their kids navigate the college admissions process. Ednovate students typically boast a 99 percent college acceptance rate, but as Jesse Noonan, Ednovate's Chief Academic Officer, explained, "We were concerned about our kids applying to college and whether they would still go based on the circumstances their families were facing."

édnovate

QUICK FACTS

- 6 public charter high schools in the Los Angeles area

- 98 percent students of color and 84 percent low-income students in 2019-20

- 65 percent of USC Hybrid High graduates went to a University of California or California State University in 2018

Best Practice #1 — Maintain & Track Contact with Students

Ednovate maintained **consistent** communication with students throughout the day to ensure students were engaged and had the resources and support they needed. At the beginning of every school day, Ednovate students took an **advisory survey** that asked what they were working on that day, how they were doing, if they had any concerns, and whether they would like a one-on-one check-in with their advisor. Students then attended **advisory meetings**, and advisors took attendance. This gave Ednovate staff a complete list of attendance by 10:30am each morning. Knowing which students were absent so early in the day allowed staff to **call families** of absent students to help them troubleshoot technology issues or

understand what work they were responsible for that day.

To get a high-level picture of student engagement, Ednovate created a **virtual learning dashboard**, which tracked the percentage of students that had devices and internet, attendance, work completion, and the percentage of students with a "C" or better in all classes. Prior to the pandemic, Ednovate did not track **work completion**, but staff found this to be an **important indicator** of engagement after realizing that several students were going to advisory but not completing their assignments.

Best Practice #1 — Realign Staff Roles to Meet Students' Needs

During the initial transition to remote learning, Ednovate leadership realized that they could leverage staff who were no longer able to do the jobs they were hired to do, (i.e., staff who work on school safety) to increase engagement during remote learning. As a result, school leadership **realigned the roles** of these employees, and they began making frequent phone calls to students who were absent, disengaged, and/or who needed resources or support.

Outcomes

By acting **swiftly** and **strategically** to keep students engaged in remote learning, Ednovate was able to maintain **96 percent average daily attendance** throughout the spring. They **acted immediately** to avoid disengagement and learning loss during the initial transition to remote learning. They used Monday, March 16, 2020 — the first day of closures — for make-up work and for students to check in with their advisors, and then they launched remote instruction on Tuesday, March 17, 2020. They even found that their virtual pre-ACT testing administration had **higher attendance** in 2020 than in previous years during in-person testing. Lastly, **98 percent** of Ednovate high school seniors were **accepted** to a four-year college or university last academic year.

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Conclusion

During the sudden and drastic shift to remote learning, educators grappled with how to keep students engaged remotely as well as how to monitor their engagement and progress. Charter schools worked rapidly to reach out to students and used **internal assessments** to **track student progress**. Schools like Ednovate had high levels of attendance and engagement by maintaining close contact with students, tracking work completion, attendance, and progress, and **realigning staff roles** to meet students' needs. As many California schools continue with distance learning into 2021, we can continue to learn from these best practices to help identify students at-risk of falling behind, monitor the quality of remote learning, and adjust practices to better serve students. Our final report further explores the importance of maintaining close contact with students to meet their social and emotional needs.

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

Mid-December 2020
- **How California's Charter Schools Supported Students' Social and Emotional Needs (POM IV)**
  In what ways did charter schools support students with issues related to mental health, hunger, and social isolation during the pandemic?

Previous POM 2020 Releases

- How California's Charter Schools Mitigated Learning Loss (POM Part I)
  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 (POM Part II)
  To what extent did charter schools help students gain access to devices and the Internet so they could participate in distance learning?

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.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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