



California
Charter Schools
Association

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How California's Charter Schools Mitigated Learning Loss

The Transition to Distance Learning Amid COVID-19
Portrait of the Movement — 1st 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.

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

According to projections, California's K-12 public school students began the 2020-21 academic year having lost up to a half of their projected progress in mathematics stemming from the state's shelter-in-place order which was enforced in the spring of 2020.ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, the data shows California's underserved students were more likely to fall behind, further widening opportunity gaps.

In an attempt to analyze how California's public charter schools responded to the challenges brought on by the pandemic, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) examined how quickly public charter schools were able to launch distance learning initiatives in March 2020 compared to traditional schools.

Quantitative and qualitative research indicates California public charter schools leveraged their flexibility and innovative thinking to implement quality & engaging remote learning quickly and strategically, thereby ensuring students — especially those traditionally underserved — continued to learn during this historic time in U.S. history. See **Appendix** for more information on methodology and key terms.

In addition, some charter schools went above and beyond meeting the needs of students. In this report, CCSA highlights Springs Charter Schools in Riverside and San Diego counties as a *bright spot* because of its ability to keep students on track academically despite the challenges.

CCSA believes best practices emanating from Springs Charter Schools can help build statewide capacity in designing and implementing quality distance learning programs moving forward.

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 first installment, ***How California's Charter Schools Mitigated Learning Loss***, explores whether charters were able to keep students on track academically. The three other installments focus on: 1) the digital divide 2) student engagement and 3) social and emotional distress.

The Problem: Statewide Learning Loss

The academic impacts of COVID-19 could be **severe** and **long lasting**

When schools closed for shelter-in-place during March 2020, many wondered whether students would stagnate or worse, regress academically.ⁱ Experts warned the average student could begin the 2020-21 academic year having lost **up to a third** of their projected progress from the last school year in reading and **up to a half** of their projected progress in math.ⁱⁱ

Other estimates were even more concerning and estimated the average student lost between 0.75 and 1.3 years of progress in mathematics (depending on the state).ⁱⁱⁱ While it is yet to be seen how California students will be impacted, local projections are troubling.

For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) estimated nine out of 10 students returned to school in the fall of 2021 having experienced “severe” learning loss.^{iv} LAUSD expected that for every day of school missed, students would need **three or more days** to make up for the lost time.^v It could therefore take students months, or even years, to get back on track.

Underserved students were **more likely** to experience learning loss

Access to educational opportunities varies by **race/ethnicity, income, and ability**. In 2018-19, test scores varied greatly by student subgroups (See Figure 1). For example, eight out of 10 Asian students met state in math compared to only one in 10 English learners.

Access to high-quality distance learning was similarly unequal between student groups.

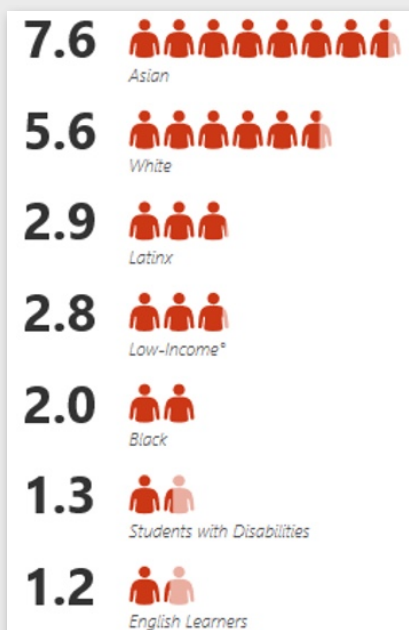
In **high-income zip codes**, researchers did not see any decline in math progress from March to late April 2020. In contrast, student progress decreased by 33 percent in **middle-income zip codes** and 50 percent in **low-income zip codes** (See Figure 2).^{vi}

Learning loss also varied by **race/ethnicity**, with the average student projected to fall seven months behind, and Latinx and Black students projected to fall nine and 10 months behind, respectively.^{vii}

English learners were especially vulnerable to learning loss, as they needed practice speaking with

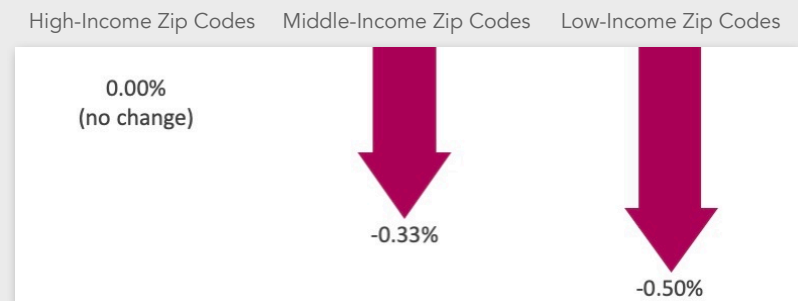
Figure 1: Proportion of student subgroups meeting state math standards, 2018-19

Number of Every 10 Students Meeting Standards



teachers and classmates. Nearly half of surveyed California parents of English learners said their child was not receiving adequate support during distance learning.^{viii} These discrepancies are especially concerning given that time spent without quality instruction can have long-lasting impacts on students, especially underserved students' likelihood of graduating, going to college, and getting/keeping a high-paying job as adults.^{ix}

Figure 2: Student progress in math from March-late April 2020^{vi}



The Response: How Charters Avoided Learning Loss

Charter schools used their **flexibility** and **innovation** to quickly design and implement quality distance learning programs.

For many educators, transitioning from in-person instruction to distance learning in spring 2020 was daunting.^x They had to quickly develop strategies for keeping students engaged and motivated, monitor progress, and provide support remotely. 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. The pandemic put this theory to the test.

In April 2020, CCSA wanted to understand how schools were supporting students during the transition to remote learning. We surveyed charter schools across the state and received responses from 31 percent of all California charter schools. We then

Figure 3: March 2020 Distance Learning Calendar

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
2	3	4	5	6
9	10	11	12	13 Charter & District Closures
16 X	17 X	18 X	19 X	20 Average Charter Start Date
23 X	24 X	25 X	26 X	27 X
30 X	31 X	1 X	2 X	Average District Start Date

compared the start dates of charter schools that responded to our survey to [district start dates](#) compiled by CalMatters, a nonprofit investigative media organization. We found that, on average, **surveyed charter schools were quicker than districts** to launch distance learning in the spring of 2020.

It took California districts **an average of 14 school days** to begin distance learning.^{xi} In contrast, it took **an average of four school days** for surveyed charter schools to implement distance learning programs. (See Figure 3).

Some larger districts had substantially longer delays. For example, the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) did not start remote instruction until April 27 — nearly a month and a half after they and many other California schools closed for shelter-in-place on March 16.^{xii}

Using LAUSD's projections cited earlier in this report, it will take SDUSD students at least 90 school days to make up for lost time.^{xiii}

SDUSD's delayed remote learning launch also illustrates another trend, where districts serving a higher percentage of low-income[±] students were **slower**, on average, to launch distance learning than their more affluent peers.

Specifically, on average, districts that began distance learning **within two weeks of closures** were only **39 percent low-income[±]**, while charters that began remote learning within two weeks were **57% low-income[±]**.

Bright Spot: Springs Charter Schools Helping keep students learning amid the pandemic

Some charter schools went above and beyond, using their flexibility and innovating to meet student needs. **Springs Charter Schools**, a network of six nonclassroom-based charter schools serving students in Riverside and San Diego counties, were well-positioned to support their students during remote learning.

With nearly 10,000 students attending mostly non-classroom based independent study programs in Southern California, Springs knows how to provide quality remote instruction at scale. Using their expertise in online learning, Springs worked quickly and strategically to create, implement, and share resources,



QUICK FACTS

- 6 nonclassroom-based public charter K-12 schools
- Served nearly 10,000 students of whom 18% were students with disabilities in 2020
- One of 10 charter schools in the country to receive the National Alliance's 2020 Above and Beyond Award

professional development, and even live lessons with students and educators around the world.

Best Practice #1 — Innovate

Within just three weeks of launching distance learning, Springs created [Open Classroom](#), a public and free community service to help parents navigate quality resources for remote learning. Open Classroom offered **highly-curated, grade-specific content aligned to Common Core State Standards**, as well as **live classes** four days per week.

Springs staff also helped educators at both traditional public schools and other charter schools transition to remote learning by **working with small school districts**, offering advice and best practices on community panels, and participating in the Riverside County taskforce on returning to schools.

Within Springs, staff acted quickly to **train teachers** on how to provide quality remote learning. During the first week of shelter-in-place, Springs produced an **online, on-demand training schedule for teachers** that focused on delivering remote learning. To create these professional development sessions, they gathered their staff experts and resources from external sources to put on webinars that are still available to Springs teachers, as well as any educators who sign up for Open Classroom.

Best Practice #2 — Personalized Support and Instruction

Personalized learning has always been core to Springs' model. To ensure that each student gets the specific support they need, Springs had an **Assistant Classroom Educator (ACE)** in each online classroom. In addition to supporting remote instruction, ACE's also set up meetings with individual students and small groups based on student achievement and growth data to provide intervention and support. Vivian Price, Assistant Superintendent of Education at Springs, noticed that school sites that leveraged their ACE's to provide more frequent 1:1 and small group support to students saw more growth in ELA and math than sites that did not leverage their ACE's as much. She also noted that small group instruction was especially valuable for Springs' English learners.

Price stressed that, "It's not engaging to have every teacher just lecture to you as you're staring into the camera." Instead, Springs trained their teachers to provide **flipped classrooms**. Under this model, a teacher shares a recording of a lecture ahead of time, and students use classroom time for conversation, small group discussion, and other engaging activities.

Outcomes

Clearly, educators and parents value Springs' expertise in personalized and distance learning. Over 6,000 people from **across the country**, as well as **around the world** — as far away as France, Australia, India, Poland, Japan, and Afghanistan — signed up for Springs' **Open Classroom**.^{xiv} Springs also used internal assessments to track student progress and see if learning loss occurred. Educators found that several Springs Charter School sites **actually grew** in math and ELA with every subgroup during distance learning in the spring of 2020.

Conclusion

Many students, especially underserved students, lost ground academically during spring 2020 distance learning. Charter schools worked to mitigate learning loss by **responding quickly** and **launching remote learning**. Schools like Springs Charter Schools used new and innovative approaches to instruction and shared resources to help all students – not just their own – gain access to quality remote learning. These efforts allowed schools like Springs to not only **reduce learning loss** but to **serve students well** and engage them in **deep learning**.

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

November 2020

- **Digital Divide** — **Focus:** To what extent did charter schools help students gain access to devices and the Internet so they could participate in distance learning?

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?

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.

To calculate the average number of days charter schools spent without remote learning, CCSA compared the number of days between reported school closures and remote learning launch dates using responses from the Distance Learning Survey. To find district averages, CCSA used data collected by CalMatters, a nonprofit investigative media organization, and similarly calculated the number of days between school closures and remote learning.

It is important to note that this is a rough estimate given that the survey does not include a representative sample of charter schools and that not all districts are included in the state database.

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

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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.

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California
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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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