

# Overcoming the *Distance*

PROMISING PRACTICES TO CENTER EQUITY  
IN IMPLEMENTING DISTANCE LEARNING



Our community is showing up. We are in this *together*.



ADVANCEMENT  
PROJECT  
*CALIFORNIA*

// COVID RAPID RESPONSE  
#CASolidarity  
[advancementprojectca.org/COVID](https://advancementprojectca.org/COVID)

# Advancement Project California

## COVID-19 Rapid Response



The COVID-19 pandemic is changing the nature of our everyday lives in unprecedented ways. In California, the pandemic is impacting student success, community representation, and the health of many. Advancement Project California, with the support and advice of several partners, is releasing policy briefs, research, and letters to bring awareness to the racial inequities unearthed by this pandemic and offers concrete recommendations to the officials that represent Californians. The “Overcoming the Distance” policy brief is one of a series of position statements to support the Californians most impacted by the international health pandemic. California will overcome this crisis by ensuring education policy, budgeting, and democracy issues are informed by those impacted most by COVID-19 - low-income communities of color.

Our community is showing up. We are in this *together.*

[advancementprojectca.org/COVID](https://advancementprojectca.org/COVID)



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## CONTRIBUTORS:

Karla Pleitéz Howell, Managing Director of Policy and Programs  
Ernesto Saldaña, Associate Director of Programs, Educational Equity  
Jessenia Reyes, Associate Director of Policy, Educational Equity  
Tolu Bamishigbin, RACE COUNTS Manager  
Emma Watson, Policy and Research Analyst, Educational Equity  
JunHee Doh, Policy and Research Analyst, Educational Equity  
Esther Nguyen, Policy and Research Analyst, Educational Equity  
Mackenzie Wright, Educational Equity Intern, Educational Equity

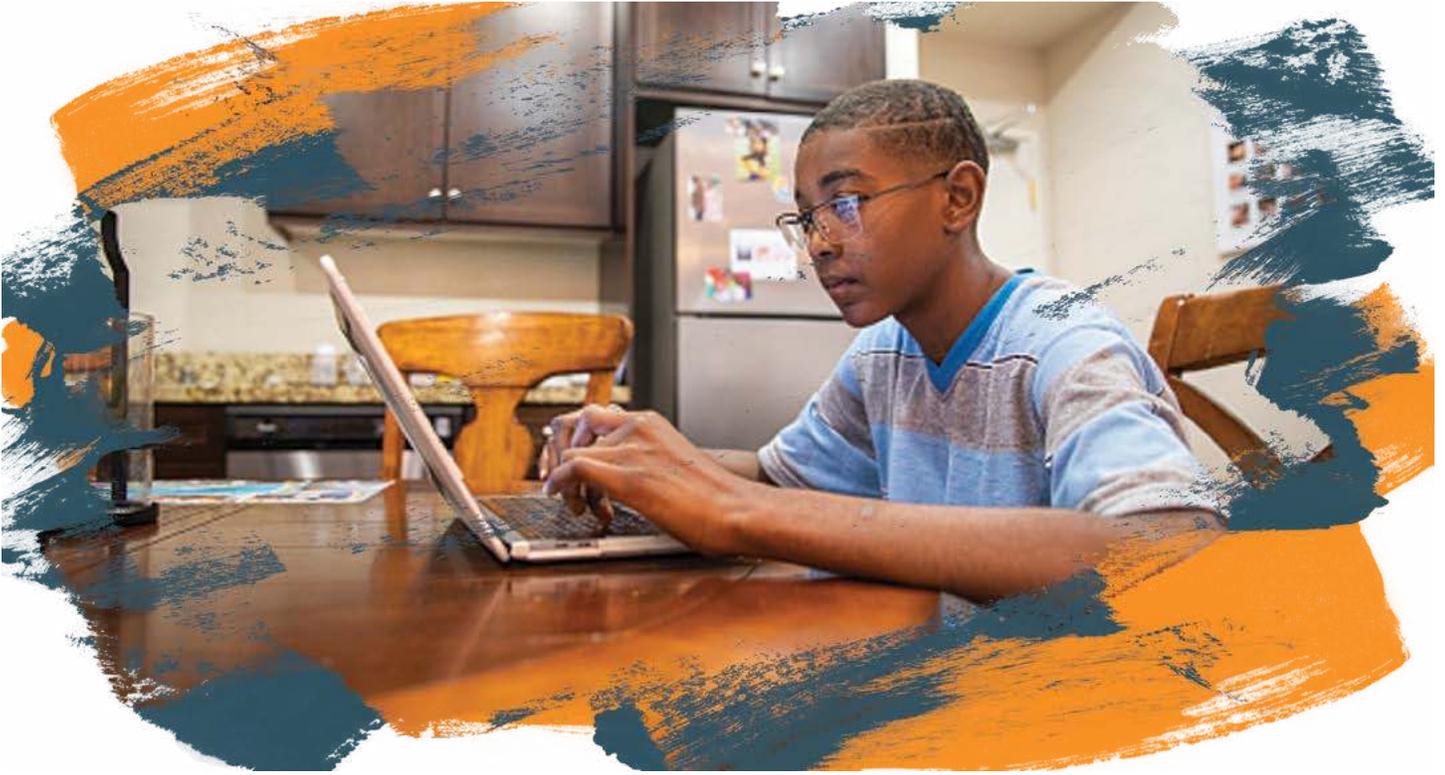
## SPECIAL THANK YOU TO THE ADVANCEMENT PROJECT CALIFORNIA TEAM THAT MADE THIS POSSIBLE:

John Kim, Executive Director  
Wendelyn Killian, Managing Director of Organizational and Leadership Development  
Katie Smith, Director of Communications  
Amy Sausser, Director of Development  
Michael Russo, Director of Equity in Community Investments  
Khydeeja Alam Javid, Director of Governmental Relations  
John Dobard, Director of Political Voice  
Chris Ringewald, Director of Research and Data Analysis  
Maria Cabildo, Strategic Initiatives, Senior Fellow

## WITH DEEPEST THANKS TO OUR PARTNERS FOR OFFERING YOUR INVALUABLE EXPERTISE IN SHAPING THE RECOMMENDATIONS:

ACLU of Southern California  
Californians Together  
Community Coalition  
InnerCity Struggle  
The Children's Partnership

# COVID-19 Exposes Structural Inequities



The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting everyone directly, changing the nature of everyday life. As the pandemic spreads, it has revealed pre-existing disparities in our state, pushing additional burdens onto those already disenfranchised. We see this most clearly in school closures.

School closures have forced school leaders, students and families to adapt to a new learning environment. School districts have introduced the concept of “distance learning” to facilitate students’ continued engagement during this global health crisis. The purpose of distance learning is to maximize a student’s well-being while minimizing disruption to their education.

Yet, it has exacerbated existing educational inequities that have long disadvantaged low-income families and families of color. In addition, structural inequities such as income inequality and residential segregation have left many low-income families and students of color without the tools and resources necessary to successfully participate in distance learning.

California’s parents worry that their children will fall behind academically due to coronavirus-related school closures. Parents, like Marilyn in Los Angeles County, are finding distance learning challenging. For this mom of three, distance learning has meant that she is now tasked with teaching lessons from three different grade levels, using unfamiliar technology, all while maintaining a full-time job. Her challenges are compounded by the fact that she must address the unique learning needs of the two of her children who have a special education Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

The California Department of Education has a critical role to play in ensuring distance learning addresses equity challenges - to meet this moment, we urge the adoption of the recommendations presented in this paper. We include highlights of distance learning practices that can serve as bright spots. The policy recommendations offered here can provide a framework for all school districts to ensure that California students, regardless of race, will have opportunities to thrive during these unprecedented times.



When schools first closed due to COVID-19, Marilyn's children were excited to stay at home and thought "summer is here early!" Understanding the impending harm of a worldwide pandemic had yet to reach their home.

As policies changed daily and the safer-at-home orders were extended, they slowly realized that their temporary day-to-day was actually their new reality, without hope of going back to school soon, if at all this year.

Marilyn continues to work full-time and manages the unique educational and social-emotional learning of her three children. She feels lucky to have the support of a babysitter and her high-school-aged niece who helps her children while she works. Being indoors at home all day, or with the babysitter in an enclosed space, has impacted how Marilyn's children interact with each other and how they each navigate their own challenges and needs.

Her 10-year-old daughter, Sarah, is shy, liked to help her teacher with tasks, and found school to be her sanctuary. Listening to the news and not being able to leave her home has caused Sarah to feel anxious. Sarah worries about catching the virus if she goes outside. Marilyn finds herself teaching Sarah breathing techniques and having constant conversations with her daughter to ease her concerns and panic during this time.

Emily, Marilyn's 9-year-old daughter, is sociable and outgoing with her friends and thrives on her afterschool dance team. She is now questioning family dynamics and dealing with at-home stresses that she normally would not notice. Marilyn has to constantly give Emily additional assignments and keep her mind distracted.

Marilyn's 7-year-old son, Mathew, is having the hardest time adapting at home and has shared that he feels worthless. Mathew has an Individualized Education Plan that requires additional time and support for reading and math. He was also receiving one-on-one therapy sessions that helped him navigate his behavior and emotions. Unfortunately, due to an insurance change, those services have been canceled. At home, it is impossible for Mathew to receive the extra attention or therapy services he needs to support his growth and development.

Marilyn gets home from work and cooks dinner, then has to check in on all three of her children and try to meet their needs knowing that she is not certified nor experienced to be a teacher. Marilyn shares that school districts can help by offering supports to troubleshoot technology, providing an overview of the lesson plans assigned to her children and a check-in phone call from her children's teachers to monitor their learning.

# Recommendations

We call on the California Department of Education to build a system that addresses equity needs now and builds for the future needs of all students. We propose the following statewide directives to school districts, to be implemented between now and the end of the school year, to prevent vulnerable students from being further disadvantaged educationally.

## I. Conduct Needs Assessments and Allocate Resources Based on Need:

Many students face gaps in access to learning essentials, such as computers. We recommend that the California Department of Education work with districts to conduct research on gaps in access to computers and internet, by race, income, language, and geography. Many districts are already using surveys and assessments to identify which students need a computer and broadband connectivity at home. These needs assessments should be a statewide directive.

Systems and processes for the distribution of distance learning devices and technology—such as computers, WiFi, and hot spots—should prioritize students and families with the highest need. Districts can adopt a need index similar to the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Student Equity Need Index 2.0. This index ensures dollars and resources are equitably distributed to schools with the greatest numbers of highest-need students. (For details about the Index, see: [https://www.equityallianceforaskids.org/.](https://www.equityallianceforaskids.org/))



## Unprecedented Times Call for Innovation

While there are no perfect models in addressing the inequities that have been unearthed during this pandemic, it is important to highlight positive examples of how some school districts have transitioned to distance learning. These emerging best practices can inform statewide direction.

### Distance Learning Bright Spot: New York City Department of Education

The largest school district in the nation, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), offers a good model for how to get essential tools and resources to students. Of the 1.1 million students enrolled in the school district, an estimated 300,000 do not have a computer at home. In response, NYCDOE began distributing its existing inventory of computers and was able to negotiate a deal with Apple and T-Mobile to acquire internet-enabled iPads. In a matter of weeks, the district distributed 175,000 computers to students, with a plan to deliver 50,000 more each week. Families can submit requests for equipment through an online survey, which school staff are able to complete on behalf of parents and guardians; students with the highest needs are prioritized. The NYCDOE has also created Google Classroom and Microsoft Office 365 accounts for every student to ensure continued engagement during distance learning. Given the inherent challenges of distance learning, some teachers have adopted practices like providing pre-recorded videos of class for students and parents to view on their own time and conducting regular check-ins catering to families’ schedules. This gives families the flexibility to learn when it is most convenient for them.

## 2. Engage Parents and Students in Distance Learning Best Practices:

Community engagement is key to ensuring that distance learning is happening in the most culturally responsive and effective way. The California Department of Education is in the best position to direct districts to examine the effectiveness of distance learning. To implement this, districts should create a committee that centers the voices of parents from communities most impacted by the pandemic. Districts can model these after the already established District English Learner Advisory Committees (DELAC). Like DELACs, Distance Learning Committees should be established at each school site, can be funded by the Local Control Funding Formula and connected with the Local Control Accountability Plan process.

## 3. Professional Learning and Supports for Teachers/Staff Related to Distance Learning:

This unprecedented transition requires supports for teachers. The California Department of Education has the opportunity to provide guidance on minimum supports to offer teachers. This should include professional development trainings that allow for peer-to-peer learning. In addition, the Department can also provide guidance to districts about minimum standards regarding trainings for teachers about technology, including the use of Zoom and other platforms. Most importantly, like many Californians, teachers are also carrying the stress of this pandemic. Thus, it is critical that teachers have access to mental health supports and counselors.



## Distance Learning Bright Spot: Los Angeles Unified School District

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) recently announced that in-person classes will not resume for the 2019-2020 school year. LAUSD has implemented a distance learning program to ensure its students receive the educational and social supports they need while observing state and local social distancing mandates. LAUSD is investing \$100 million to provide students with tools and technology during the COVID-19 crisis. For the remainder of the school year, LAUSD students will engage in weekly instruction via virtual platforms or other methods including recorded video, live or recorded audio, and written guidance. To ensure that all students have access to instruction, the district is distributing devices to students who do not have laptops at home. They are working in partnership with Verizon to provide internet service to as many as 100,000 students who do not have online access. In addition, students will have access to services provided by support staff including psychiatric social workers, pupil services attendance counselors, school psychologists, counselors, and speech and language pathologists, who work either virtually or by phone. Further, LAUSD is spearheading an unprecedented partnership between a school district and local public media channels - PBS SoCal, KCET and KLCS-TV - to broadcast educational content for students. Also, to serve students' nutritional needs, the district has already begun providing meals for low-income families via a number of shelters and distribution centers throughout Los Angeles.

#### 4. Provide Clear Guidance on Minimum Instruction Time for All Students:

Student home environments are shaping the unique experience each will face during this pandemic. Given this dynamic, we know the critical role a teacher can play for California students during this time. Further, we know that students that do not have the opportunity to connect with their teachers will fall behind. The California Department of Education should offer clear guidance on instruction time. We recommend a minimum of three hours a week per subject.

#### 5. Support Historically Underserved Populations:

The pandemic will compound the summer learning loss experienced by many low-income students of color, and we anticipate that students will return to school at different levels of readiness when the next academic year begins. Concerned parents worry their children will fall behind, while high school students experience deep anxiety around how this school disruption will impact their credits and graduation. Now more than ever, it is crucial districts include low-income students and families of color in policy development, as our children's education success is interdependent on all parts of the system.

- **Black Students:**

One major problem is the historic disinvestment that has led to under-resourced and constrained schools that perpetuate inequity for Black students. To ensure school systems build on the strengths and needs of Black students, we recommend that all levels of education policymakers build an infrastructure like an Office of Equity or Office of Black Student Achievement, and incorporate comprehensive data systems. In San Bernardino Unified School District (SBUSD), the Office of Equity and Targeted Supports invests in Opportunity Gap specialists, who work with educators at the beginning of the school year to build a positive relationship with students, connect with parents, and utilize ongoing data to support students and address needs as they come up. Additionally, the Office of Targeted

Supports in SBUSD provides wrap-around supports through connections with local community-based organizations. To build academic excellence, it is important to have someone on campus who utilizes data for early intervention in academics and wrap-around supports. Offices of Equity can promote equitable access to rigorous academic curriculum by monitoring student academic outcomes, student access to rigorous academic opportunities, and ensuring an analysis of gaps.



- English Learners and Dual Language Learners:** Language development is a highly social endeavor that requires multiple opportunities to engage in conversations throughout the day, meaning that distance learning poses a special risk for English Learner students. Districts must equip all educators with prioritized and targeted trainings on evidence-based strategies that support distance learning for English Learners and Dual Language Learners.
- Foster Youth:** California has 60,000 children in foster care who experience high rates of school instability and exposure to trauma stemming from the events that brought them into the system, extended stays in the system, being separated from family, and multiple placements and schools. To minimize the impact of additional disruptions due to COVID-19, districts must continue to provide supplemental tutoring and supports for foster youth including stable placements, additional mental health supports, and ongoing connection to their family.
- Special Education Students:** There are 795,047 children with disabilities in California. National assessments show that students with disabilities are 85% more likely than their peers to be held back. CDE must ensure students with disabilities do not go without services and fall further behind their peers during COVID-19. This can be done by requiring districts to ensure at least weekly connections between students with disabilities and teachers, track services provided so that districts can follow up post-COVID, and virtually convene with families and other support systems to discuss progress of Individualized Education Plans.

### Distance Learning Bright Spot: Riverside Unified School District

Similar to LAUSD, Riverside Unified School District has made distance learning tools like Google Classroom, Flipgrid, and Google Meet available to students to keep them engaged in their studies until the end of the school year. The district also provides weekly instructional material by grade level and subject through its website, which includes detailed instructions for parents in both English and Spanish. For families who do not have access to a printer but prefer to use printed handouts, the district will print weekly packets for students and allow parents to pick them up at various school sites. In addition to providing extensive recommendations for parents to facilitate at-home learning, the district's website also provides information about low-cost internet plans for families who lack access. The district has continued to provide meal service by doing meal distribution at various school and community sites.



## 6. Blue Ribbon Commission to Prepare for Student Success and Support of Teachers:

Despite the incredible efforts teachers and school administrators are taking to reach students and provide distance learning, the reality is that our education system will be playing catch up as students move to the next grade level. While we find ourselves in the middle of rapid response to immediate needs, the California Department of Education must plan ahead and be ready to offer districts concrete and helpful guidelines for re-opening schools. In order to provide this guidance to districts, we recommend the establishment of a Blue Ribbon Commission by the Department to plan ahead and address critical issues, including:

- Plans to offer students additional learning opportunities to address learning loss due to COVID-19, including summer school;
- Cost analysis for addressing learning loss;
- Authentic community engagement to address equity issues;
- Creation of professional learning communities for teachers to address student academic needs
- Steps for re-opening schools to maximize safety and education outcomes
- Wraparound services that will address mental health needs of educators, students, parents and administrators

The Commission should include representatives from diverse backgrounds, including but not limited to: labor, non-classified employees, the early care and education field, community organizers and advocates, legislators, school districts, county offices of education and others.

### Distance Learning Bright Spot: San Diego Unified School District

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has invested \$19 million to secure and distribute Chromebooks and other technology, such as adapters, headphones, and internet hot spots to over 100,000 students, as well as provide professional development on remote learning for teachers and substitutes. To ease this process, the district has made it clear that students are not required to reimburse for any lost or damaged computers. For families who do not have access to the internet, the district is working with Cox and Spectrum to provide free WiFi for two months with a \$10/month fee thereafter. Further, the district has decided that a student's grade cannot be lowered from what it had been prior to school closures' teachers are able to raise grades, however. SDUSD has also created specialized education kits for homeless or hospitalized students, and offers translation services for remote parent-teacher interaction. Like Los Angeles and Riverside Unified school districts, SDUSD has continued to provide meals - up to 20,000 every weekday - for its students.



# Innovation Can Lead to Greater Equity

Marilyn's story is not an isolated one. Across the state, many families are navigating similar obstacles and are in urgent need of support from state leaders. Parents like Marilyn need assistance from their school districts to troubleshoot technology, provide an overview of the lesson plans assigned to their children, and offer regular phone calls from their children's teachers to monitor their learning.

We know that education is the springboard for success, especially for low-income students, students of color, and students with specific challenges. But the COVID-19 pandemic is changing how the California education system operates. Distance learning has created a difficult situation for students, teachers, and parents.

The California Department of Education has a unique opportunity to innovate as we all confront this crisis. By learning from and bringing to scale promising practices from local districts to our statewide system, we can seize this moment to have a long-term impact on our children's futures.

The best practices and recommendations outlined in this policy brief provide a roadmap for the California Department of Education. By following this map, we can retool our system to meet this moment of crisis while also building strong, sustainable practices for the future that center equity at the heart of our education system.

Advancement Project California stands ready to work with the Department and local districts to confront this crisis and face the future together.





Advancement Project California is a multi-racial, multi-generational racial justice organization with expertise in research, advocacy, and policy. We work with partners and communities to expand educational opportunities for California's children; create healthy and safe neighborhoods; ensure communities of color have a voice in our democracy; strengthen movement-building; and shift public investments toward programs that benefit all Californians—not just the privileged few.



[@ADVANCEMENTPROJECTCA](https://www.facebook.com/advancementprojectca)



[@AP\\_CALIFORNIA](https://www.twitter.com/ap_california)

[WWW.ADVANCEMENTPROJECTCA.ORG](http://WWW.ADVANCEMENTPROJECTCA.ORG) // [EDUCATION@ADVANCEPROJ.ORG](mailto:EDUCATION@ADVANCEPROJ.ORG)