

Managing Public Education Resources in California During and After the Coronavirus Crisis

Practical Tips and Considerations for School District and Charter School Leaders

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This document offers practical information and guidance to help school district and charter school leaders in California strategically manage and allocate resources amid widespread school closures and an almost certain reduction in education funding over the coming year due to the crisis caused by the Coronavirus 2019. Because the circumstances of each district and charter school vary, they must all make their own decisions about how to strategically allocate resources based on the specific needs of their communities. The guiding principles that are detailed later in this document, and that are summarized in the box below, provide some anchor points for education leaders to keep in mind when making those decisions.

Current Fallout From Coronavirus 2019 in Education

Concerns about Coronavirus 2019, with the consequent school closures and with significant economic fallout, are having profound effects on the public education landscape, from how educators deliver instruction to the amount of revenue available for operating schools.

- » **Millions of students are affected by school closures.** As of April 14, 2020, at least 124,000 public and private schools in the United States had closed due to the health crisis, affecting at least 55.1 million students.¹ Included in those numbers are more than 10,000 California schools that serve some 6.2 million students and that closed

¹ *Education Week*. (2020). Map: Coronavirus and school closures. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

Principles for Decision-making

Ensure continuity of core services. To the greatest extent possible, but consistent with public health guidelines, ensure continuity of basic services, principally quality instruction, including technology for online learning, but also meals for eligible students.

Focus first on providing support for students who need it most. During school closures, attend to those students who are least able to get learning support and resources from home.

Despite many unknowns, don't wait to plan. While responding to immediate critical needs is essential, set aside time to confer with other district and charter school leaders to plan, strategize, and think ahead to next year's budget.

Keep the community informed. Leaders should communicate with the community about their efforts to support students and families and about anticipated budget challenges and potential shortfalls in the future.

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effective March 19.² Over 60 percent of those California students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, nearly 20 percent are English learners, 12 percent are students with disabilities, and over 3 percent are experiencing homelessness.³

- » **The extent of the fiscal impact from the coronavirus crisis is still unknown, but predictions are grim.** Economists and financial experts predict short-, medium-, and potentially long-term implications for school district and charter school budgets and for the availability of resources; they see reduced funding and increased costs.⁴ In thinking about economic and financial stability, some elements of the current situation are similar to those at the start of the Great Recession in 2008/09. But today's dramatic downturn has some unique features that set it apart from that earlier economic and financial decline, among them:

- **Speed:** Today's unemployment claims have been rising at an unprecedented rate. In

December 2007, at the start of what became the Great Recession, unemployment claims were at 2.6 million; 18 months later they spiked at 6.6 million. In comparison, over the two-week period of March 14-28, 2020, as stay-at-home orders began rolling out across the country and many businesses considered to be non-essential had to close their doors, U.S. unemployment claims rose from 1.8 million to 6.6 million.⁵

- **Broad-based:** Every sector is being affected by this crisis, whereas during the Great Recession, the most severe effects were tied to housing and banking.
- **Externally triggered:** Today's financial downturn results from a public health crisis, not a structural weakness in any industry. During the Great Recession, the recession was tied to structural weaknesses in the housing and financial sectors, whereas today's economic challenges are linked to a public health emergency.
- **Unknown factors:** Because the current economic downturn is so tightly linked to public health, any estimates about both its scope and the potential timing and pace of recovery are based on many unknowns, including human behavior over the coming weeks and months. In comparison, during the Great Recession, economists had a much clearer picture of both the causes of the recession and the path to recovery.

2 Education Week. (2020). Map: Coronavirus and school closures. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

3 California Department of Education, Data Reporting Office. (n.d.) *2018-19 enrollment by subgroup for charter and non-charter schools*.

4 Burnette, D., II. (2020, April 13). How will coronavirus affect school spending? 9 questions answered. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/13/how-will-coronavirus-affect-school-spending-9.html>; Burnette, D., II. (2020, March 19). Districts brace for crash in state K-12 revenue due to coronavirus. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/19/districts-states-brace-for-crash-in-k-12.html>; Mulvihill, G. (2020, March 27). Coronavirus deals one-two financial punch to state budgets. *Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/c0f90f74b1c70e73d8102317af3682ef>

5 U.S. Department of Labor. (2020). *COVID-19 impact: The COVID-19 virus continues to impact the number of initial claims and insured unemployment* [news release]. <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>; U.S. Department of Labor. (2020). Unemployment insurance weekly claims data. <https://oui.dol.gov/unemploy/claims.asp>

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» **School districts and charter schools are trying to adapt quickly to the new context for schooling.**

School districts and charter schools are attempting to navigate public health guidelines in a way that allows them to provide essential services for students, including technology to ensure connectivity for distance learning, curricular materials for learning from home, and, as needed, daily meals. This shift is easier for some districts and charter schools than for others. For example, those districts that had already integrated technology into their curriculum may have an easier time transitioning to fully virtual instruction, while others — particularly those in areas with more limited internet access — may face significant barriers in providing students with access to virtual learning. Some school districts must also address issues related to collective bargaining. Because teacher contracts do not address today's unanticipated working conditions, there may be a need to re-negotiate the length and structure of the working day.

» **School districts will need to make decisions on how to strategically allocate resources.** Rapid shifts in how schooling takes place due to concerns about the new coronavirus have practical implications for the ways school districts and charter schools use their resources, including decisions about how to deploy and/or preserve resources in the near to long term. Based on trends from previous economic recessions, it seems likely that for many school districts and charter schools, state education funding will be flat or decline for the 2020/21 school year. And, while the federal government has approved \$13.5 billion in funding for schools through a recent federal stimulus package — the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act — these one-time funds represent only a small

portion of operating funds for a school district or charter school.

These factors, perhaps coupled with some that are still unknown, will profoundly influence the operation and delivery of education in California for the near future and beyond. The principles detailed in the following section can help guide decision-making in these uncertain times.

Principles to Guide Decision-making During and After the Coronavirus Crisis

Although school district and charter school leaders will need to consider a range of factors as they make budget decisions now and in the coming months, the following principles offer an organizing framework to focus decision-making on some of the most critical areas for schooling.

Ensure continuity of core services

A first priority for school districts and charter schools is to ensure continuity of essential services, starting with the most central of all: teaching and learning. If teaching and learning are to take place with schools closed, students and teachers alike must be given the necessary technology to engage from their homes — hardware, software, and internet access — along with the support needed to use technology effectively. For some teachers, that support may need to include help in how to shift instruction from face-to-face to online. Eligible students should also continue to receive free or subsidized meals.

As they strive to provide such services while schools are closed, district and charter school leaders will want to assess the effectiveness of their efforts. For example, they may want to measure the

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impact of different approaches (e.g., changing the time or location of food pick-up sites). They may also want to look carefully at which students are accessing the services and which ones are not, by tracking the degree to which individual students are engaging with online instruction and other education resources and/or by identifying which eligible students are or are not receiving meals. With this information in hand, education leaders can undertake more targeted outreach to understand why some students are not engaging with the services.

In considering what to offer beyond core services during these lean budget times, education leaders will need to make choices based on the specific needs of their community. For example, a school district or charter school may want to offer mental health supports to students or their families, or academic intervention for students who are struggling academically. Regardless of the particular services education leaders might be considering, they should consider prioritizing and providing a small number of them well, rather than rolling out too many at once. In addition, education leaders should consider testing interventions on a small scale (e.g., for one class) before rolling out initiatives across the district or charter school. Traditional forms of support may or may not be successful in a distance-learning environment. As educators attempt innovative approaches, it is important to measure the success of those efforts and refine the approaches, as needed. Education leaders may also want to consider what types of support or professional learning are necessary for teachers and other staff as they implement new strategies, given how different the current context is for teaching and learning.

Additional considerations for providing meals to eligible students and supporting infrastructure services are detailed next.

Meals for Eligible Students

For some students, meals served at school may be their only nourishment during the weekdays. In a nationally representative 2012 survey, 56 percent of teachers said that “a lot” or “most” of their students depend on school meals as their primary source of nutrition.⁶ In California, about 1 in 5 children comes from a food-insecure household.⁷ With widespread school closures across the state, school district and charter school leaders can help ensure their students do not go hungry. For example, they can:

- » Establish locations where families can come to pick up meals.
- » Consider using district-owned school buses for meal delivery, as well as redeploying any other contracted transportation providers for that same purpose. Some school districts that are using their transportation services department to deliver meals are also having them deliver curricular materials (e.g., devices, books, and other materials).
- » Because the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has cautioned that the heightened fear, stress, and anxiety prompted by infectious disease outbreaks can be particularly overwhelming for children and teens, districts may want to engage their counselors, social workers, and other available staff in a dual role: these staff can help deliver meals and, at the same time, check in with students and their families (from a safe distance).

6 Share Our Strength and APCO Insight. (2012, June). *Hunger in the classroom: Share our strength teacher report 2012—Survey of K-8 public school teachers nationally*. <http://join.nokidhungry.org/site/DocServer/2012-teacher-report-full-final.pdf>

7 California Association of Food Banks. (n.d.) *Hunger fact sheet*. <http://www.cafoodbanks.org/hunger-factsheet>

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Critical Infrastructure Services

Most states have authorized schools to receive state funding in spite of school closures, and employees will continue to be paid.

- » If payroll and accounts payable staff are not able to operate from remote work environments, districts might consider instituting swing shifts for essential staff to come into the office, with appropriate social distancing, to process payroll and attend to critical financial operations.
- » If a school district or charter school works with other government agencies to process those payments, it is vital to coordinate with those agencies.

Focus support on students most in need

In addition to having issues around food and housing insecurity, which are exacerbated during any economic downturn, vulnerable students are more likely than their peers to fall behind academically during school closures. This conclusion about vulnerable students falling behind is based on research indicating that students lose academic skills and knowledge during summer break and that when it comes to reading achievement, learning losses are greater for low-income students than for the general student population.⁸ It stands to reason, then, that the even-longer school closures (i.e., spring plus summer) prompted by the current health crisis could lead to greater declines in achievement, particularly among vulnerable student groups. Consequently, school district and charter

school leaders should keep equity at the forefront of decisions about resource allocation, attending first to those who are least likely to have solid learning support and rich learning opportunities at home.

Distance learning⁹ can exacerbate opportunity gaps for vulnerable student populations, with different families being more, or less, able to support their children's learning at home, depending on family circumstances. District leaders should consider how they might adjust the deployment of resources to account for these differences in learning opportunities during school closures. For example, academic intervention specialists could be deployed to provide additional one-on-one support for students whose parents are less able to provide academic support for them.

Non-classroom staff redeployed to help struggling students

District leaders should consider how to redeploy skilled non-classroom staff by mapping their availability and matching their skill sets to help meet student and family needs in a distance-learning environment, especially for those students who struggle most even in a classroom setting. Such staff might include principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, staff who provide academic intervention, librarians, and counselors or social workers. For example, a reading intervention specialist could prioritize time to work over video with struggling students. An assistant principal could support other staff in setting up schedules to check

8 Quinn, D. M., & Polikoff, M. (2017). *Summer learning loss: What is it, and what can we do about it?* Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/summer-learning-loss-what-is-it-and-what-can-we-do-about-it/>

9 Note that we are referring to the provision of emergency remote learning opportunities for students during the COVID-19 crisis, and that some types of distance learning that are intentional in their planning, design, and implementation may not have the same impacts on vulnerable student groups.

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in with vulnerable students and/or could connect with parents to assess their potential needs related to providing at-home learning supports for their children. And a counselor could assess needs and provide emotional support for students and their families through a mix of virtual communication (e.g., telephone, computer-based video) and, as proposed earlier, face-to-face communication carried out from a safe distance in the course of meal delivery.

Use this time to plan for declining budgets

District and charter school leaders will have many choices to make in the coming weeks, months, and year about how to most efficiently and effectively allocate their more-limited resources to ensure services to students, support for teachers and other staff, and the health and safety of their communities. District and charter school leaders should be intentional about setting aside time to confer with others in their district or charter school to plan, strategize, and think ahead to next year's budget. Some key areas for consideration follow.

Declining state revenue; tightened budgets at local level

At the state level, a projected revenue shortfall resulting from Coronavirus 2019's economic impact¹⁰ suggests that California's overall budget for fiscal year 2020/21, including its education budget, will either be flat or smaller than the 2019/20 budget. Exactly what the 2020/21 state budget will look like is unknown. As is true for many states, extensions of the federal and state tax filing deadlines mean

that California will not have a clear picture of the 2020/21 revenue until well into the coming fiscal year. Many districts and charter schools in the state were already concerned about tighter budgets due to declining enrollment, increasing pension obligations, rising special education costs, and other rising operational costs.¹¹ Economic downturns only compound such concerns. For example, during healthy economic times, school systems can usually count on some year-to-year savings in staff costs as their more-veteran teachers retire and their empty positions are filled with newer, less costly educators; however, during downturns, veteran educators are less likely to retire or otherwise leave.¹²

Current state revenue projections signal a need for education leaders to prepare sooner rather than later for the increasing fiscal challenges that are likely to come. Ensuring solvency will be vital to districts' ability to continue delivering basic services in an environment with many unknowns. A key strategy is to start by defining a district's or charter school's most critical functions — that is, its core work — and then to consider what strategic investments it can afford to make while reducing or eliminating other functions in order to make up for revenue gaps.

10 Petek, G. (2020). *COVID-19 and California's evolving fiscal outlook*. California Legislative Analyst's Office. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4203>

11 Krausen, K., & Willis, J. (2018). *Silent recession: Why California school districts are underwater despite increases in funding*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/silent-recession/>

12 Roza, M. (2020). *What will the financial turmoil mean for public education?* [March 2020 webinar]. Edunomics Lab, Georgetown University. <https://edunomicslab.org/2020/03/24/what-will-the-financial-turmoil-mean-for-public-education/>

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Use of dollars from federal CARES Act stimulus package

The federal CARES Act stimulus package provides some limited relief for districts and charter schools. The aid is intended to be short-term (i.e., funds can be used by states or LEAs in the current fiscal year

or in the next fiscal year), is likely to be only a small amount per district (i.e., accounting for approximately 0.5 to 3 percent of its operating budget), and is largely directed at districts serving what are considered to be high-need populations (i.e., distributed based on the Title I formula).

Examples of phased action, with potential funding sources

In response to the widespread school closures resulting from concerns about Coronavirus 2019, district and charter school leaders need to take a phased approach, with decisions made and actions taken during what this brief refers to as the “urgent period” (as soon as possible, but minimally within the next two months); the “recovery period” (between two and eight months from now); and the “stabilization period” (between six months and a year from now). What follows are some examples of key actions districts and, in some cases, charter schools as well, might take in each phase, with a potential funding source identified for each action.

Urgent Period (within the next 2 months)

Transition to distance learning for all students.

- Redeploy their intervention specialists and coaches to provide additional online instructional support (Funding Source: Title 1 funds).
- Equip buses with Wi-Fi and park them in different locations in the district so as to create internet “hot spots” that would provide internet access for families and teachers who are currently without access (Funding Source: CARES Act stimulus package).

- Take carry-over funds from teacher professional learning opportunities that have been cancelled in the spring and apply them, instead, to covering additional preparation time for teachers to resume classroom instruction (Funding Source: Title 2/ Title 3/IDEA Part B/CARES Act stimulus package).

Stabilization Period (within the next 6 to 12 months)

Faced with flat or declining budgets and the potential for increased costs (e.g., related to pensions, special education), consider how best to use the limited dollars in moving forward.

Recovery Period (within the next 2 to 8 months)

Provide additional academic interventions to help mitigate students’ lost learning time during the crisis, especially for student groups most in need of such learning support. Begin preparing for teachers and students to return to their classrooms in the fall, assuming the health crisis abates.

- Offer students who are struggling academically the opportunity to receive four to six weeks of additional instruction during the summer (Funding Source: Title 1/IDEA Part B/CARES Act stimulus package).

- Use unspent funds that were previously allocated for improvement efforts at underperforming schools to support additional intervention programs in the summer or in the next school year to address learning gaps (Funding source: CSI/TSI).
- Engage stakeholders to help determine district or charter school priorities on the basis of student need and goals for student achievement and well-being (Funding source: all funds).

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Given the nature of the stimulus funds, it might be best to avoid using them for efforts that will require ongoing investments, such as for longer-term contracts with external service providers or for hiring new staff. Instead, districts and charter schools receiving the funds might better direct them to efforts intended to bolster quality program delivery during school closures, such as refining teachers' approach to distance learning, preparing for summer school and/or extended fall learning, and training and redeploying support staff to provide short-term, high-priority services.

Increased ending balances for fiscal year 2019/20 a possibility

Many school district and charter school leaders may find that, in the current environment, some funds that had been allocated in the 2019/20 budget will remain unspent, perhaps contributing to a surplus budget at year-end. Potential areas for savings include, for example, funds allocated to pay consultants to provide enrichment programs for students, unspent professional learning funds, and unspent contracts for vendors or consultants in both general and special education.

District and charter school leaders should consider whether to save all or part of the surplus funds, so as to have available money for unexpected future needs or to strategically allocate all or part of the funds in the near term, for example, in the area of increased staffing time used to mitigate students' possible learning loss as a result of school closures (e.g., summer school, extended fall instruction).

Keep the community informed

As with any crisis, it is critical that school districts and charter schools be intentional in their communication with the school community. This requires

involving community stakeholders not just to help leaders identify challenges in the school district or charter school, but also to engage the education community (i.e., students, families, teachers, staff, community members) as problem-solvers.

The current pandemic has created unprecedented upheaval in districts and charter schools, in communities, and in individual families. This upheaval, most apparent and alarming to people and systems in the short term, will undoubtedly have ripple effects in the years to come. Ongoing communication with the public about budgets (for this year and next), any potential shortfalls, and, for districts especially, any implications for collective bargaining with teachers is critical. Moreover, districts and charter schools should use these communication opportunities to reinforce how budget decisions are intended to align with their goals for student achievement and well-being. This includes communicating about how resources are being directed to support vulnerable student groups.

Given the difficult choices California district and charter school leaders are having to make now and likely in the coming year or two, they should communicate clearly and consistently about the rationale for these critical decisions. The public should also be kept informed of the possibility of future school closures, as well as of their school district's or charter school's proactive efforts to plan for this scenario.

Conclusion

This document is intended to support school district and charter school leaders as they attempt to make the best possible decisions about how to strategically allocate resources to support student learning in the coming weeks, months, and year as the entire country deals with and then starts

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recovering from the far-reaching effects of Coronavirus 2019. Although economists, researchers, and educators cannot yet anticipate all of the challenges and opportunities ahead, the path forward can be smoothed by a focus on ensuring high-quality teaching and learning experiences for

students, directing additional resources to those students with the greatest needs; planning in an intentional, deliberate, and collaborative fashion; and conducting ongoing communication and engagement with districts' and charter schools' respective communities.

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