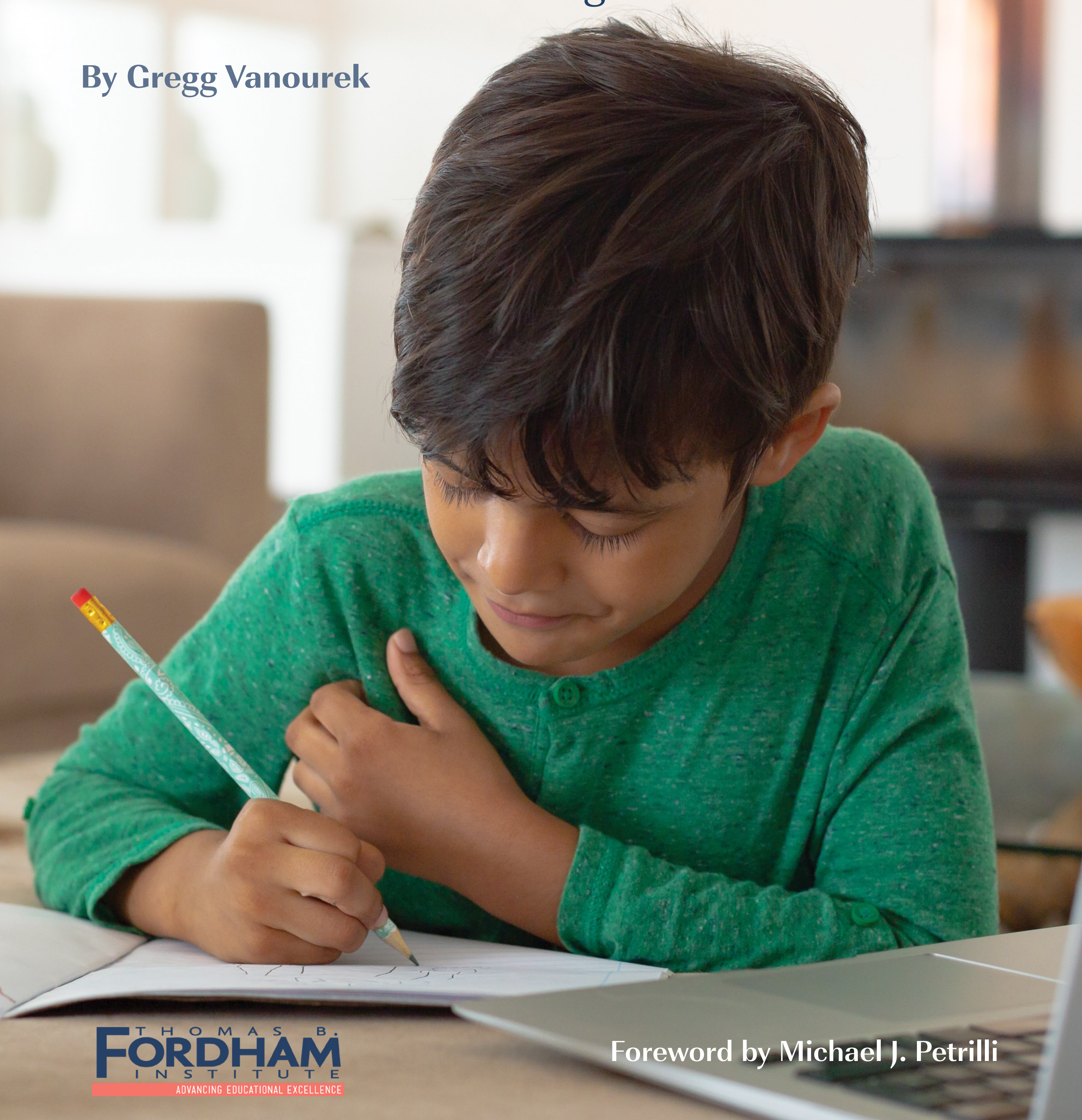
August 2020

Schooling Covid-19:

Lessons from leading charter networks from their transition to remote learning

By Gregg Vanourek



Foreword by Michael J. Petrilli

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Foreword

By Michael J. Petrilli

The coronavirus pandemic has created enormous challenges for American society unlike any in our lifetimes. For most schools, the spring of 2020 was nothing short of a calamity, as they were challenged to meet their students' academic, social, emotional, and nutritional needs at a distance. It was as if we had asked produce farmers to grow vegetables without plots of land. Yes, technology now makes some of that feasible (thanks to aquaponics), but nobody would expect a farmer to accomplish the shift overnight, much less to do it successfully. Yet that's what we asked of educators when we expected them to teach students from far away.

So it's no surprise that "remote learning" did not, for the most part, go well, which is the only fair conclusion that can be drawn from the available data. Dozens of surveys and several analyses of school and district websites show that it took the vast majority of schools multiple weeks to stand up any type of online instruction, and challenges abounded even once they did. Millions of families didn't have high-speed Internet access or devices suitable for learning. Teachers were unfamiliar with online learning platforms and, on average, provided instruction just two hours a day. Districts that lacked a centralized curriculum had no feasible way to shift to digital materials. Many students were simply lost, not logging in and unreachable by educators. Of the parents, 80 percent reported that their children learned less than normal during the crisis. And of course, all of this was (or wasn't) happening as a pandemic spiraled out of control, bringing fear, illness, and death into our communities—and especially into hard-hit communities of color.

> "It took the vast majority of schools multiple weeks to stand up any type of online instruction, and challenges abounded even once they did."

It makes sense, then, that many parents, policymakers, pediatricians, and others are eager for students to return to school this fall. But as is now painfully clear, the Covid-19 resurgence makes that unlikely in a growing number of states and localities, with many large districts planning for online learning for the entire first semester. Even where the pandemic seems to be under control, social-distancing requirements mean that most students will spend significant chunks of time learning at home for the foreseeable future. We have no choice but to get better, faster, and fairer at remote learning for the sake of the "Covid Generation."

What we need, then, are concrete recommendations for how to significantly improve the remote learning experience for students, teachers, and families. That is what the present report aims to provide, with ideas culled from educators who achieved striking success in the face of the viral challenge this spring—educators from some of the nation's leading charter school networks: Achievement First, DSST Public Schools, IDEA Public Schools, KIPP DC, Noble Network of Charter Schools, Rocketship Public Schools, Success Academy, and Uncommon Schools. Together, they educate more than 140,000 students, most of them poor Black and Hispanic children.

> "[These networks] are known as highly effective, well-run 'learning organizations,' with gobs of talent, enviable autonomy...and the mission, resources and incentives to keep innovating."

Why study those schools? We at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute have long admired these networks, given their breakthrough results for low-income students and children of color—not just on academic tests but also in terms of long-term outcomes such as college completion. They are known as highly effective, well-run "learning organizations," with gobs of talent, enviable autonomy from the many rules and strictures that can make life difficult for educators in the district sector, and the mission, resources, and incentives to keep innovating. Because they tend to have a culture of continuous improvement, we surmised that if anyone had met the coronavirus challenge, it would be these schools. And they did not disappoint.

But let us be clear, especially for readers associated with traditional public (and private) schools: We're confident that hundreds, if not thousands, of other schools could also have served as models of how to make an effective transition to remote learning. Several have received well-deserved attention in the press, such as the systems serving Miami, Dallas, and Cleveland. Sadly, though, most remain unknown to us.

Nor would we claim that the eight charter networks we looked into are representative of the charter sector writ large. Before the pandemic, they were among the best of the best, as judged by various research studies. They are likely outliers in their response to Covid-19, as well.

Still, one hope for charter schools at the outset was that they might serve as "laboratories of innovation" for the entire enterprise of K–12 education. That was our hope with this report, as well.

To carry out the ambitious assignment of interviewing leaders, teachers, and parents at these networks and distilling their lessons for the field, we turned to our good friend, and one of Fordham's founders, Gregg Vanourek. He is a teacher, trainer, author, and researcher, as well as a working parent who helped his daughters with remote learning during the crisis. He runs Gregg Vanourek LLC (training and consulting) and is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Denver and at Stockholm Business School. Vanourek is coauthor of three influential books, including *Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education* (Princeton

University Press, 2000), *LIFE Entrepreneurs* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), and *Triple Crown Leadership: Building Excellent, Ethical, and Enduring Organizations* (McGraw-Hill, 2012).

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The eight charter networks featured in this analysis achieved remarkable success, transitioning quickly and effectively to remote learning. All were up and running with online instruction within days of the mid-March shutdowns. Together, they distributed tens of thousands of devices and Internet hotspots, and they offered a robust mix of live and recorded instruction, which led to high levels of student engagement. Their teachers and leaders, though exhausted, embraced the chance to innovate like they hadn't in years. More details and data about these successes appear in the report that follows—as well as the recognition that even these exceptional organizations struggled with aspects of the challenge.

What did we learn? Most critically, what are the key actions taken by the networks that other schools and school systems could take in the months ahead to make remote learning more successful? Five key steps stood out to us. In brief—then spelled out in the pages that follow—these schools strove to:

1. Meet their students' social, emotional, and nutritional needs.
2. Place technology in the hands of each of their students and educators quickly.
3. Re-create the structure of the regular school day and regular grading practices.
4. Reach out to individual students and families on a regular basis.
5. Embrace a team approach to teaching and instruction, centered around a common curriculum.

Many other U.S. schools doubtless strove to do likewise. But the success of the charter networks came from doing all five of these key things—and doing them remarkably well. Others could, and should, follow their lead in the months ahead.

Prologue: America's education system struggles to respond

"Experience is a hard teacher. She gives the test first, the lesson afterwards."
– Vernon Law

Tsunami of school closures

Beginning in March, a wave of school closures rocked the nation and came close to drowning the K–12 system. Many of those closures were sudden. Though there had been rumors and talk, the announcements came as a shock to many.

Chaos ensued. How long would the pandemic last? How long would school be closed? What were the risks to students and others? Families and teachers wanted answers, but there were too many unknowns.

Then came a second wave of decisions that extended the temporary closures. What was once unthinkable became reality: Schools would remain closed for the rest of the academic year. The pandemic shuttered essentially all of America's 130,000 school buildings, affecting more than 56 million students (public and private) and about 3.7 million teachers across about 14,000 school districts, challenging them to keep providing education but remotely.

This was not just a U.S. problem. By mid-April, according to the United Nations, 192 countries had closed all their schools, affecting more than 90 percent of the world's learners—1.5 billion children and young people.[1]

In the U.S., state and local education officials bore the brunt of the burdens. Many struggled. According to an *Education Week* report, "most states had few requirements for how districts should structure remote learning": Seventeen states recommended specific minimum and maximum times for students to be in remote school, thirty-two took steps to release districts from requirements on instructional time (hourly or daily), and twenty-two recommended that teachers hold office hours for students.[2] It was a confusing mishmash.

Barrage of challenges

Atop the inconsistencies and mixed messages piled more challenges. Districts and schools had to decide very quickly what to do and how they would provide education, meals, and other services to students no longer allowed in their buildings. Were devices on hand that students could use? How could they get them to children's homes? What about Internet

connectivity? How would they approach curriculum, teacher training, special education, state tests, SATs, Advanced Placement exams, extracurriculars, and graduations? What about nutritional and mental health and other wraparound services? Where should they begin? For starters, where *are* the students? How can educators find them—or know who needs what? It seemed as if nearly everyone—districts, schools, teachers, students, and parents alike—had to start over, almost with a blank slate.

Many districts discovered that large numbers of pupils were suddenly missing amid the pandemic, a problem compounded by obsolete contact management systems with old and incorrect information. They had no way to locate their missing students.[3] Clark County, Nevada, was unable to get in touch with about 80,000 students, according to a May report.[4]

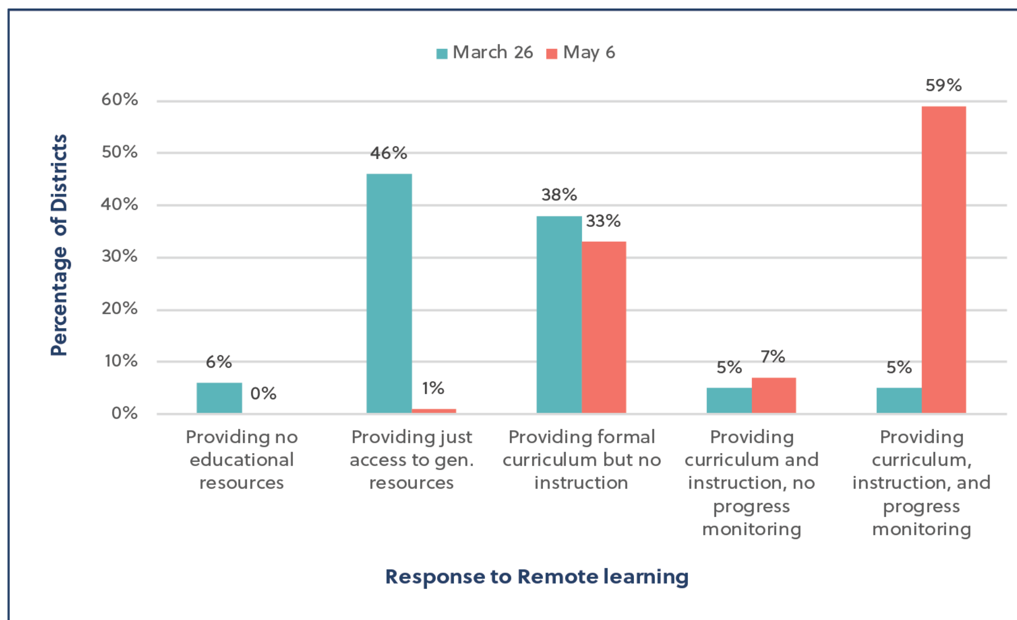
School and district responses

> "Rolling out quality remote learning plans is something that would ordinarily take districts months, if not years, of planning. The Covid-19 crisis forced districts to accomplish this in a matter of weeks, while balancing equity and connectivity needs and providing access to basic resources. It was unlikely to be perfect."
>
> **– Betheny Gross and Alice Opalka, Center on Reinventing Public Education[5]**

Educators tried a wide array of approaches to remote learning. In some cases, the focus was on paper packets sent home together with a list of web links from outside providers. According to a national survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), more schools in higher-poverty districts relied on paper packets instead of digital instructional tools. In many cases, there were long delays before remote school began. Chicago Public Schools provided enrichment learning activities until distance learning began on April 13. Many educators and parents assumed at the outset that schools would only be closed a couple weeks.

According to Brian Greenberg of the Silicon Schools Fund, writing in *Education Next*, "Districts rolled out distance learning plans slowly."[6] A study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) found that most districts were still not providing any instruction as of March 28, and "of those providing instruction, few provide[d] something akin to a comprehensive educational experience."[7] But the rollout continued such that—as we see in Figure 1—much had changed by May 6, as the school year neared its end.

Figure 1. Districts ramped up remote learning programs over time



Source: Robin Lake, "The Latest from a Nationwide Survey: Districts Continue to Struggle Toward Online Learning."

CRPE estimated that, by year's end, 85 percent of school districts "made sure their students received some form of grade- and subject-specific curriculum in packets; assignments posted in Google Classroom, Canvas, or some other platform; or guidance to complete segments of online learning software." Yet "only one-third of districts expect[ed] all of their teachers to continue to engage and interact with all of their students around the curriculum content.... Just one in three districts expect[ed] teachers to provide instruction, track student engagement, or monitor academic progress for all students.... Only 27 percent of rural and small-town school districts expect[ed] teachers to provide instruction.... Far too many districts are leaving learning to chance during the coronavirus closures."[8]

How well did it work?

How did this sudden, unexpected experiment in taking U.S. schools online end up faring? Initial reviews were not encouraging. Stephen Sawchuk of *Education Week* called it "the lost spring."[9] A June *Wall Street Journal* article called it a "spring disaster":

> This spring, America took an involuntary crash course in remote learning.... It was a failure.... The problems began piling up almost immediately. There were students with no computers or Internet access. Teachers had no experience with remote learning. And many parents weren't available to help.[10]

According to NWEA Research, crisis-induced learning loss was likely to be severe: "Missing school for a prolonged period will likely have major impacts on student achievement come fall 2020.... Preliminary Covid slide estimates suggest students will return in fall 2020 with

roughly 70 percent of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. However, in mathematics, students are likely to show much smaller learning gains, returning with less than 50 percent of the learning gains."[11]

Equity concerns abounded, too. Many educators feared that the crisis would aggravate existing inequalities in the U.S. education system, and early data point in that direction. The ParentsTogether Foundation found the following in a survey of families:

- "Parents from low-income homes are ten times more likely to say their kids are doing little or no remote learning (once a week or less) (38 percent vs. 3.7 percent).
- Kids from low-income homes are three times more likely not to have consistent access to a device (32 percent vs. 10 percent) and five times more likely to go to a school not offering distance learning materials or activities at all (11 percent vs. 2 percent)."[12]

"Affluent districts are twice as likely as high-poverty districts to require live instruction" during the crisis, reported CRPE (28.8 percent versus 14.5 percent).[13] According to a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, remote schooling "threatens to worsen the achievement gap": "The Covid-19 crisis threatens to undo years of educational efforts to help disadvantaged students catch up to their more affluent classmates."[14]

Yet most parents were forgiving. Several polls found that the vast majority were satisfied with the instruction and activities provided during the pandemic.[15] Parents acknowledged that schools were doing the best they could under brutal circumstances.

But as we shall see, some schools managed to do much better.

Methodology in brief

The goal of this project was in-depth understanding of how leading charter networks responded to the Covid-19 crisis with remote learning initiatives. How did they manage the transition from traditional schooling to remote learning? What enabled them to respond as they did? What worked well, and what didn't?

Charter school networks, also commonly called charter management organizations (CMOs), are nonprofit entities that manage multiple charter schools. They often provide a range of services for the charter schools, including back-office administrative functions, hiring, training, public relations, data analysis, and more. These are distinct from education management organizations (EMOs), which are for-profit entities that manage charter schools and perform similar functions. For purposes of this report, charter school networks are not unlike districts that manage multiple public schools.

For this study, we interviewed forty people (charter network executives, principals, teachers, and parents) from eight leading charter school networks nationwide. We also gathered information about their remote learning programs and, for context, those of many public schools and districts around the country. This research is not nationally representative, however, and does not make claims about which networks were better or worse or about whether charter public schools responded better or worse to the crisis than district public schools.

All quotes from charter school executives, principals, teachers, and parents are from our interviews, unless otherwise indicated. We refer interchangeably to "remote learning programs," "remote school," "E-School," and the like. Any errors in the report are the sole responsibility of the researcher. Please see the appendix for more details on the methodology.

Featured charter school networks

Charter school network	Geography served	Grade levels	Number of schools	Number of students	Student poverty data
Achievement First	Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island	K–12	37	13,940	82% low income
DSST Public Schools	Colorado (Denver)	6–12	15	6,354	71% free and reduced-price lunch
IDEA Public Schools	Texas and Louisiana	PreK–12	96	53,000	89% free and reduced-price lunch
KIPP DC	Washington, D.C.	PreK3–12	18	6,800	100% free and reduced-price lunch
Noble Network of Charter Schools	Illinois (Chicago)	6–12	18	12,334	88% low income
Rocketship Public Schools	California, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C.	TK–5*	20	9,706	76% socioeconomically disadvantaged
Success Academy	New York City	K–12	45	18,285	74% free and reduced-price lunch
Uncommon Schools	Massachusetts (Boston), New Jersey (Camden and Newark), and New York (New York City, Rochester, and Troy)	K–12	54	20,300	84% free and reduced-price lunch

** TK refers to transitional kindergarten, a publicly funded program designed for children who turn five between September 2nd and December 2nd in California.*

Next, we outline the actions taken by these charter networks to stand up remote learning programs quickly in the crisis.

Action Item #1: Meet students' social, emotional, and nutritional needs

> "During this time we made sure to start every conversation with 'How are you doing?' We made sure that we started with humanity and kindness and taking less for granted."
> **– Brett Peiser, CEO, Uncommon Schools**

For educators, this pandemic has been a powerful reminder that school is about much more than instruction. During the crisis, schools had to address the basic needs of students and families first; otherwise, learning may well have been impossible. It would have been a grave mistake to skip over the human elements—of basic needs and survival—and focus exclusively on academics. This past spring, educators had to begin by stabilizing the patient, restoring a sense of security and social connectedness, for learning to be able to take root again.

When the crisis began, Achievement First immediately had its advisors conduct wellness checks with all students and families. Some students had daily individual check-ins with their teacher. DSST conducted a daily wellness survey, with 100 percent of students having a weekly touch point with their advisor during E-School. In its crisis response, KIPP DC modified Maslow's famous "hierarchy of needs" pyramid to reflect how learning depends on other factors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. KIPP DC crisis response starts with basic student needs

Source: KIPP DC.

On the first day of the "shelter-in-place" order, teachers at Rocketship Alma Academy launched funny cooking videos and bedtime stories in an effort to "bring love and hope during the chaos of this pandemic."[16] Rocketship sent this message to its families in April:

> School campuses across the country are closed for the year.... A lot has changed in the last month. But one thing that should not change is the fierce sense of urgency and commitment to serve every student with excellence, every day.... Schools provide a safe haven and source of stability for the millions of students who have dealt with trauma in their lives—from poverty, crime, domestic violence, racism, and more. With schools closed, those safety nets are gone. While we can't replace the learning and supports that are provided on campus, we must still work to innovate new ways to provide stability for our students and families in this time of crisis.... Just like back on campus, our schools foster social connections, deepen relationships with families and students, and show our Rocketeers how much they are loved and cared for.

Uncommon Schools also worked to strike a good balance between the academic and nonacademic aspects of running a school during a crisis. Their top priorities were the safety and wellbeing of their students, families, and staff, plus stellar instruction and services. They relaunched their extracurricular programming to ensure students had healthy outlets (for example, online cooking, hip hop at home, and wellness offerings).

Meals: Hungry students can't learn

For many students, school is not only a fount of intellectual nourishment but also a source of food. According to an AEI survey, 95 percent of U.S. schools were providing meals to students by late April (a number that had grown as schools ramped up capacity during the crisis).[17] Providing food was a major focus of these charter networks, as well, and most also engaged in substantial fundraising to help their families address other critical needs.

By March 25, Rocketship had launched a Care Corps, comprised of teachers and mental-health providers, at all of its campuses and created a family relief fund, with $400,000 raised for 800 families. There were at least four Care Corps members at each school, responsible for contacting every Rocketship family every day, focusing especially on the most vulnerable families. Each morning, they sent a brief, five-question wellness survey to all families. They called every family that reported via the survey that it needed something, and teachers called those who did not complete the survey. The team then coordinated with Rocketship's regional directors to get families what they need (for example, food, rent assistance, and unemployment help).

DSST Public Schools delivered more than 1,400 meals weekly to its community (out of 6,300 total students) in partnership with Denver Emergency Food Network. The network raised $79,803 for the DSST Covid Family Relief Fund for meals, as well as $14,000 to help families with rent and utility bills. DSST also loaned desks, chairs, and headphones to families that needed them to help create a good learning environment at home.

Achievement First raised about $230,000 for families in need during the crisis. All charter schools in the IDEA network operated meal services during the crisis, and as early as March 26, IDEA had served over 158,000 meals to families just in the New Orleans district. The KIPP DC network distributed 58,000 meals to families during the crisis and disbursed at least $150 to any family requesting emergency assistance. One teacher in KIPP NC rode the bus ninety-three miles over six hours to deliver meals and education packets to her rural students.[18] The Noble Network distributed 106,000 meals to families as of May 20, including 65,000 bags of healthy snacks donated by a company.

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There's little doubt that schools in both the charter and district sectors will continue to provide meals to their families this fall. But they might also want to follow the lead of these charter networks and raise funds for other critical needs. And as we'll explore in greater depth in Action Item #4, they will only know whether families need help if they ask them and if they develop ways for families to raise their hands without feeling shame, including through individual contacts.

Action Item #2: Place technology in the hands of every student and educator quickly

Before the crisis, many schools already faced a "festering problem of digital inequality," and it was aggravated during the pandemic by opening a new divide between families with workable technology at home versus those lacking it.[19]

A 2019 Associated Press review revealed that an estimated 17 percent of students lack access to computers at home.[20] *Education Week* found that "44 percent of teachers and district leaders report that the majority of their students are sharing devices" during the crisis.[21] Teachers noted that some students were too embarrassed to admit that they had to share devices with siblings or that some had to go to a relative's home to find more reliable Wi-Fi.

According to the AEI survey, by May 29, 66 percent of schools had a program to provide devices to students at home, 70 percent supplied some form of assistance for students to access the Internet at home, and 55 percent offered help for both devices and Internet access.[22] Those numbers ramped up significantly from March to May.

> "Hardware is easy. Reliable Internet is tough."
>
> **– Stefanie Sanford, The College Board**

Devices, however, were just the beginning. Schools also had to make sure that the devices could connect to the Internet—and do so in the students' homes. So the connectivity race was on for mobile hotspots and Wi-Fi coverage.[23] According to a June 2020 report by Common Sense and BCG, the access gap "is larger than previously understood":

> Before the pandemic an estimated fifteen million to sixteen million K–12 public school students lived in households without either an Internet connection or a device adequate for distance learning at home, representing 30 percent of all public K–12 students. Of these students, approximately nine million students live in households with neither an adequate connection nor an adequate device for distance learning.... Approximately 300,000 to 400,000 public school teachers (8 percent) lack access to adequate connectivity and 100,000 (3 percent) lack devices.[24]

That report also noted tougher Internet challenges among rural students, as well as Native American, Black, and Hispanic students. A third of households with children and no Internet

cited affordability as the major reason for not having a connection. At least 18 million Americans have limited or no access to high-speed broadband connections. Trying to do remote learning with choppy bandwidth is a fool's errand.

"Rapid deployment" of devices by charter networks

> "We knew technology would be the gating factor regarding whether students would continue to receive an education."
> **– Dacia Toll, CEO, Achievement First**

How did the charter networks address these issues of access? Most of the eight that we interviewed began with a rapid survey of families to learn about their technology needs, followed by a massive mobilization and rapid deployment of devices and materials, with almost military-style central command, field operations, supply chains (that is, sourcing new devices rapidly from sellers amidst a nationwide competition for devices), and communication blitzes to teachers and families.

Achievement First already had Chromebooks for many of its students, but these were stuck in closed buildings. Network executives made the bold decision to go in to retrieve them. They asked for volunteers, and two hundred people raised their (washed and sanitized) hands. Within about a week, they distributed about 8,000 Chromebooks (total Achievement First enrollment is 14,000 students) and ordered a thousand more Chromebooks and Wi-Fi devices to try to get ahead of what would likely be a barrage of orders from schools and businesses. By mid-April, 97 percent of students in the network were up and running with remote learning. It wasn't long before all students had Chromebooks, and the network let students keep them over the summer (and joined with other charter networks to run a remote summer academy).

> "By mid-April, 97 percent of students in the network were up and running with remote learning."

DSST Public Schools already had one laptop per student before the closures, so it was able to achieve 100 percent device access among its students for its "E-School," as they called it. The network preloaded all devices with the necessary software before distributing them, while also establishing a robust program of technical support, swapping out any malfunctioning device for a working machine at the student's doorstep, a kind of DoorDash for devices. The network achieved 100 percent connectivity by partnering with local Internet service providers to connect families to the best free and low-cost Internet services, as well as providing access to Wi-Fi hotspots for families who most needed them.

Success Academy had a preexisting technology infrastructure, with students in grades 4–12 already having laptops and accustomed to submitting and receiving assignments digitally. Still, that left a device vacuum for students in grades K–3, so the network obtained and

distributed more than 10,000 tablets to its K–3 pupils (Success Academy serves 18,000 students in grades K–12, mostly in elementary school). Every student had a device by May. Success Academy also helped families lacking Internet access tap free connectivity services from Comcast and other providers.

Rocketship loaned out a total of 5,600 Chromebooks during the crisis (total Rocketship enrollment is 9,634 students, all in elementary school), and it sent school bags filled with learning materials home with students before the closures were finalized. By mid-May, about 95 percent of students had devices. The network also purchased another 5,000 Chromebooks to prepare for the fall so that it can have one device per student across the entire network.

When closures commenced, Uncommon Schools promptly surveyed students on their technology needs and found that more than a third did not have what they needed. The network distributed more than 5,000 newly purchased Chromebooks (total Uncommon Schools enrollment is 20,300) over the spring. The devices came first to the network, where staff configured them with the necessary software and settings (for example, manually setting up Zoom accounts for each student), and then distributed them to families. Uncommon Schools arranged about a hundred hotspots for students who needed them.

> “IDEA discovered that a quarter of its 53,000 students lacked reliable access to the Internet.”

KIPP DC already had Chromebooks for students before the crisis and bought about 3,500 new Android tablets for every PreK–4 student, while middle schoolers used Chromebooks. The network distributed 6,000 devices (total KIPP DC enrollment is 6,800). KIPP DC helped families sign up for Comcast’s free data plan and helped with mobile hotspots.

IDEA Public Schools retrofitted and distributed about 16,000 laptop and Chromebook devices (total IDEA enrollment is 53,000 students). IDEA discovered that a quarter of its 53,000 students lacked reliable access to the Internet. The network helped over 4,000 families sign up for free packages with data providers and purchased 6,000 MiFis (branded mobile hotspot devices) for students, while also equipping twenty-five buses with super-hotspots that could provide Wi-Fi to two hundred devices at once.

Noble purchased and distributed 6,500 new Chromebooks to students as of May 20 (total Noble enrollment is 12,000 students). The network arranged 1,300 Wi-Fi hotspots for students and provided six months of free Internet service.

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Despite these impressive efforts, many of the networks reported significant challenges, such as the following:

- Technology supply shortages or delays

- Lack of adequate technical support for students, teachers, and administrators for all the new hardware, software, and data connections
- Concerns about whether some technologies are appropriate for public education (for example, whether the videoconference and other technologies being used for remote learning are compliant with applicable laws and regulations about student and family privacy)

There's no doubt that the greater autonomy enjoyed by charter schools—as well as these networks' fundraising prowess, which helps compensate for the fact that charter public schools receive significantly lower per-pupil revenues than district public schools, on average—allowed them to move quickly to purchase and distribute devices. Leaders in the district sector, meanwhile, often face cumbersome procurement systems and their own financial pressures. Going forward, money from the CARES Act and any future federal relief funds might help districts and schools close the gap.

Action Item #3: Re-create the structure of the regular school day and regular grading practices

"This is unprecedented. We're not used to planning for a pandemic.... There is nothing easy about this. We are all working a hundred times harder.... We're not just giving a bunch of links. This is really a virtual school. We have taken the most precious elements of our school design and made it manageable for parents and effective for kids' learning."

– **Eva Moskowitz, founder and CEO, Success Academy**

For decades now, education technologists have envisioned a future wherein schooling is completely reimagined. Gone would be classrooms of twenty to thirty students and a teacher, the lockstep curriculum, "seat-time" requirements, and even grades. In their place would be a new world of individualized instruction, with students learning at their own pace and according to their own interests, with educators supporting and facilitating the process as children and adolescents gradually achieve competence and confidence.

That is not the model that these charter networks embraced during the pandemic. Though several of them were already heavy users of technology, their goal this past spring was to replicate as much of their brick-and-mortar approach as they possibly could. In contrast to many traditional public schools, they strove to create and enforce a typical school day for their pupils, with a mix of live and recorded lessons, as well as independent student work. Most also maintained their regular approach to grading. Undergirding all this was the understanding that children need structure and routine, especially during uncertain times, and familiar learning practices and a sense of belonging in the school community.

Remote school design principles

One finding from this study is the critical importance of clear and strong design principles for remote learning (building on an already strong, research-based school design). The cascade of challenges during this crisis threatened to overwhelm educations and leaders, so the fact that network executives developed design principles gave these education professionals a clear signal about what was expected and how things would work without being overly prescriptive about how they must execute them in their local contexts (recall that many of these networks operate in a number of different cities or even states). See Table 1 for a sampling.

Table 1. Remote learning design principles at charter networks

Achievement First design principles for remote learning

- We need to lead with our "care for the whole person" value and keep our community together. We need to have enough touchpoints and direct contacts to make sure we have a pulse on our kids and each other.
- We create a shared "container." Having a consistent instructional approach and schedule will enable efficiencies (family communication, tech issues, and curriculum design) and collaboration.
- We need a simple, clear plan that we can execute well. None of us has ever done this before. The more complexity we add, the harder it will be to do it well.
- We need continuity and consistency. We—our scholars, teachers, and families—need consistent routines for remote learning and remote community that will become a source of stability and comfort.
- We are designing for "most." There will be no effective plan that works for every single student, parent, and teacher. We will need flexibility and extra support for the students, families, and staff who need it.

DSST E-School core element design principles[25]

- 100 percent access: Leverage our one-to-one model to ensure every student has their laptop and Internet connectivity to access E-School.
- Connection and community: Uphold our commitment to the human condition, maintain our welcoming communities, and foster connection through creative continuity of school culture.
    - A consistent routine and schedule.
    - Daily relationship connectivity through advisors and teachers.
- High-quality content: Provide high-quality, rigorous instruction for all students, ensuring access for exceptional learners.
    - Designing standards-aligned online content.
    - Centralization is key to appropriately adapting for exceptional learners.
    - Clear learning expectations.

Success Academy K–12 remote learning plan guiding principles

- Simple, simple, simple.
- Plans can be easily deployed at any time, for any given amount of time.
- Clear roles for leaders, teachers, parents, and students to continue teaching and learning while remote.
- Plans must work from a parent point of view while maintaining a high excellence bar (that is, assignments match the "at-home schedule," allow for intrinsic motivation, and are thoughtful about each and every resource).

- Reading is our top priority.[26]
- Minimal additional work to create remote learning plans across network and schools.
- Our goal for grades K–4 is to maintain mastery of current learning objectives at time of closure, with a focus on reading.
- Our goal for grades 5–12 is to continue and further student learning and master material by unit.

Noble Network remote learning commitments

- Ensure that remote learning materials are available to students and families that reinforce critical grade-level standards and prioritize social and emotional needs.
- Monitor and track student engagement on a weekly basis.
- Ensure educators are virtually available and engaged with their students every school day.
- Maintain established structures to facilitate staff collaboration, planning, and development regarding the implementation of remote learning plans and to support long-term planning.
- Ensure the school community is virtually available to students and families during regular school-day hours.
- Support the continued development of all educators to meet the demands of remote learning.

Uncommon Schools guiding principles for remote learning

- Accessibility: All students can use remote learning regardless of their access to different kinds of Wi-Fi-enabled devices.
- Clarity of responsibility: Clear roles for students, parents, teachers, and leaders.
- Workable for families: Our plan must be workable for families without access to childcare and/or multiple Wi-Fi-enabled devices at home and should not impose additional hardships for either student or staff families.
- Preparation for next grade level: The goal is to prepare students for the next grade level by prioritizing the highest leverage content remaining in their current grade level with an emphasis on reading.

Live and asynchronous instruction

> "The plan was clear in its simplicity and guiding philosophies,
> which led to quick buy-in and alignment."
> **– Sean Healey, principal, Uncommon Preparatory Charter High School, Brooklyn**

When it comes to live (a.k.a. synchronous) versus asynchronous instruction, the picture was mixed. District public schools employed asynchronous instruction more often, but many schools used both. For example, teachers may welcome pupils into a live Zoom room, make announcements, conduct live whole-group teaching, and then have students watch videos and do independent work, before checking in again as a group. According to the AEI survey, "86 percent of schools in districts [used] asynchronous platforms.... By May 29, 44 percent of schools offered synchronous education platforms...a substantial increase from late March, when only 3 percent of schools listed plans for using synchronous platforms."[27] According to a *Chalkbeat* report, "about 70 percent of teachers reported holding live instruction with students at least once a week, though again a good many said they did this rarely or never."[28]

At the charter networks we studied, most employed a blend of live and asynchronous learning, but that blend varied substantially by grade level. Many, but not all, of the networks came to value live teaching and learning more over time, in part because it helps replicate a sense of school or classroom community that many students (and teachers) said they missed.

According to Brian Greenberg of the Silicon Schools Fund,

> There are two competing factors with distance learning. On one hand, families want synchronous (live) teaching that will keep kids on a schedule and give them 'in person' interactions with their teachers. On the other hand, families want flexibility to manage the complexity of working from home while supporting students, sharing devices, etc. Our most successful schools use a combination of the two approaches: 30–120 minutes of daily live instruction and 90–180 minutes scheduled flexibly in the form of independent work, recorded lectures, office hours, or online learning software.[29]

At Achievement First, middle and high school students took live classes, but elementary students did not (except for some guided reading in small groups). The network moved toward more live instruction after the first couple of weeks, as they observed that this would help teachers to respond to and give feedback to students and prevent misunderstandings and that it would strengthen engagement between teachers and students—building community and reducing feelings of isolation.

Uncommon Schools also employed a blend of live and asynchronous instruction, shifting to more of the latter as it learned that family circumstances warranted more instruction that

was flexible in timing. DSST, which runs middle and high schools, created a network-wide schedule for its schools with mostly synchronous instruction. Rocketship, which runs only elementary schools, started with a plan for entirely asynchronous learning but quickly moved to scheduled, live Zoom classes (recorded for students who missed them), as teachers wanted opportunities for students to engage with their peers and families were requesting a consistent schedule, which could be facilitated by some live lessons at set times.

Many interviewees noted the importance of following a clear and consistent schedule for students and parents (and teachers), something they learned after conducting surveys in the early weeks of remote learning. Families indicated a desire for more routines and opportunities for their students to connect with classmates. "Part of navigating toxic stress and trauma," noted Preston Smith, cofounder and CEO of Rocketship Public Schools, "is having consistent routines and rituals." Achievement First created a simple daily schedule that started with a morning class meeting or advisory, then had four core academic blocks (with a longer break for lunch), and then time in the afternoon for additional intervention, office hours, or one-on-one advisor check-ins.

"Part of navigating toxic stress and trauma is having consistent routines and rituals."

Our interviews also surfaced a hidden tension. Most of the charter networks pushed out network-wide recordings of lessons from master teachers, believing that this enhanced both quality and efficiency. It was a wise choice but one that brought trade-offs, including a corresponding reduction in live learning between teachers and their own pupils, along with less time for whole-class discussions, inquiry, and debate. One interviewee noted, "Our instructional vision is very 'procedural' (I do–we do–you do)" in remote learning "and has shifted away from the inquiry/discourse model we've embraced in brick-and-mortar" schooling.

This arrangement allowed for increases in speed, quality, and consistency but meant some losses in dialogue and inquiry, with many students skipping the optional teacher office hours. It will be interesting to see how these trade-offs are managed going forward.

Remote learning approaches differed significantly across grade spans (elementary versus middle versus high school), as seen in the sections below.

Remote learning in elementary school

The early grades present a remote learning challenge, because younger students have limited and varying abilities to engage well with this form of instruction and because they require much more parent involvement. The pandemic forced tough decisions about whether these young learners should have devices, about managing screen time, and about how much time should be spent on learning at home. According to *Education Week,* "44 percent of elementary teachers report their schools are equipping each student with a device" (the number was much higher in middle and high school).[30]

At Success Academy, K–2 students received 3.75 hours of content (that is, a morning meeting, reading for ninety minutes a day, writing for thirty minutes a day, completing sixty minutes of math work a day, plus other work such as science and read alouds), while pupils in grades 3–4 got 4.75 hours (including reading twice, math twice, writing, science, and typing). The network used live instruction almost entirely once elementary students had devices.

Teachers contacted every student twice daily. The focus was on having conversations about reading and math problems: discussing what students were reading and talking through their approaches to math problems (for example, whether they are imagining the problem accurately and how they selected a strategy and why). According to Jessica Sie, director of literacy and history at Success Academy,

> For our youngest learners, so much of what we do is in person and thinking about the read alouds and the science and the reading instruction in small groups.... You could just picture walking into a first-grade classroom, right? You have a group of kids on the floor reading. You have some students on a mat, and they're working together. And so taking that into a digital environment was definitely a challenge. The way that we approached it was to give really clear guidance. We sent parents frequent communication with daily updates about the simple clear learning plans for their kids.... For us, that meant: what are you reading each day, reading the books at home or using great online platforms like Tumblebooks and EPIC; doing some writing about the book you've read. So really simple...doing some science instructions.... And then for math, what are a few problems that are aligned with the unit? And then we just checked in with parents through phone calls.[31]

Most schools offered shorter work blocks in their elementary-grades schedules. A sample day for K–1 pupils at Rocketship included morning virtual assembly at 8:00 a.m., a phonics lesson for twenty minutes, a half-hour Zoom session with the class to discuss a book the class was reading, snack and stretch breaks, enrichment sessions, lunch, science for half an hour, math for half an hour via Zoom, painting, talking by phone to a teacher about reading, and an end-of-day virtual celebration with singing and dancing.

At Uncommon Schools, students in grades K–1 read or were read to for thirty minutes a day, did read alouds twice a week, completed math tasks twice a week and mixed-practice math problem-solving twice a week, completed a writing task twice a week, and completed a "core" task twice a week. Through grade 4, students submitted one reading and one math assignment to their teacher each week by Thursday at 11:00 a.m. Teachers held remote office hours Monday through Thursday from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., so students could ask questions and teachers could give feedback on assignments to ensure understanding. Teachers had a ten- to twenty-minute check-in with students and/or parents weekly to check on student wellbeing, identify family needs, and provide feedback or answer questions about student work.

At IDEA, teachers held live classes with K–1 students via Microsoft Teams in short work blocks of twenty to thirty minutes and also live lessons for students in grades 2–5 (recorded for

those who missed them). They also used Teams to create assignments to track student engagement and address misconceptions or learning gaps.

Remote learning in middle school

Middle school students have greater ability to engage with remote learning independently. Here are snapshots of remote learning in the middle grades among our interviewees.
At Achievement First, the formal schedule for middle school students ran from 9:00 a.m. to 3:40 p.m. (8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. for teachers), built around core academic blocks (English language arts, history, math, and science) of one hour each, with ten-minute breaks and a longer lunch break. In each block, there was a fifteen- to twenty-minute instructional video recorded by a lead teacher, then forty minutes for student work and discussion with teacher support as needed. Teachers were available for small-group tutoring and office hours later in the day for students who needed more support.

Success Academy middle schoolers spent seven hours per day learning, with an hour for lunch. Students read for an hour a day and completed an hour each of English, history, math, and science, among other work.

DSST relied heavily on network-managed courses for middle school. Students logged in to class via Microsoft Teams (video session) and completed their daily attendance and wellness-check survey and had a morning advisory check. Then, they accessed content modules (for example, a literacy block, math block, science block, and social studies block, all published for the week every Monday at 8:00 a.m.), connected with their teachers in daily open office hours, had mandatory tutoring (on Fridays), completed assignments (due at the same time each week), and received feedback from their teachers on their work.

At IDEA Public Schools, teachers held live classes for middle school students via Microsoft Teams (recorded for those who missed them). They also used Teams to create assignments to track student engagement and address misconceptions or learning gaps.

Remote learning in high school

> "Schools are very social places. It's a huge part of being in high school—time with friends, peers, extracurricular programming."
> **– Brett Peiser, CEO, Uncommon Schools**

High school introduces more complexity with schedules and subjects, more independent work, and more complicated extracurriculars. Here are snapshots of how charter networks structured their high schoolers' remote learning.

Each day at Uncommon Schools, high school students joined their teachers online for a live lesson or accessed a twenty-minute instructional video from Google Classroom for one of their core academic classes, viewed during its scheduled one-hour class period. During the

remaining forty minutes, they accessed the classwork handout from Google Classroom and completed it using guidance from the video and other resources provided to them or from the teacher who stayed online for questions. They submitted their completed work by the end of the one-hour class period. This counted as their attendance and was graded for completion and accuracy. Teachers were available via Zoom during the forty minutes following the video (office hours). Advanced Placement teachers could decide whether to assign additional work outside of the hour period. Grades were based on classwork and assessments. See Table 2 for an illustration of a high school schedule.

Table 2. Uncommon Schools general high school schedule of remote instruction

Time	Content
8:00–9:00 a.m.	Math • 8:00–8:20: Students watch live or recorded instructional videos • 8:20–9:00: Students work on the classroom handout; math office hours (teachers on Zoom)
9:00–10:00 a.m.	English • 9:00–9:20: Students watch live or recorded instructional videos • 9:20-10:00: Students work on the classroom handout; English office hours (teachers on Zoom)
10:00–11:00 a.m.	Science • 10:00–10:20: Students watch live or recorded instructional videos • 10:20–11:00: Students work on the classroom handout; science office hours (teachers on Zoom)
11:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.	History • 11:00–11:20: Students watch live or recorded instructional videos • 11:20–12:00: Students work on the classroom handout; history office hours (teachers on Zoom)
12:00–12:30 p.m.	Break
12:30–2:00 p.m.	Electives (students can take multiple courses during this time) • Schools determine their own specific schedules during this time • Note: just Monday to Thursday (Fridays are half days)
2:00 p.m.	All classwork due if not submitted during class (to count as attendance and for credit)
2:30–4:00 p.m.	Targeted tutoring (just Monday to Thursday; Fridays are half days) • Teachers reach out to provide individual or small-group support (teacher driven) • Other content (small-group instruction and counseling, for example) may take place during this time

Success Academy high school students were "in class" for eight and a half hours daily, with forty minutes for lunch. They read for an hour a day, completed an hour of English, and worked on history, math, and science for ninety minutes each. At Success Academy middle and high schools, all teaching and learning was done digitally, using Google Classroom and videoconferencing. The network used live instruction almost entirely for middle and high school (and elementary school, once students had devices). Lessons began with a videoconference launched by one of the content teachers per grade to set up student expectations and learning objectives for the day. All students in the grade joined the same video call, and all content-area teachers for their subject were on the call. Teachers continued to teach their daily lessons for math, science, English language arts, or history, using Google Classroom to share assignments, grade work, and give students feedback.

At DSST, high school pupils had morning advisory checks, literacy and language blocks, math blocks, science blocks, and social studies blocks. They also had advisory and college-success lunches twice a week, Advanced Placement or make-up/remediation work with office hours, and advisory check-ins on Fridays. At IDEA, teachers held live classes for high school students via Teams (recorded to view later by students who could not join live). They also used Teams to create assignments to track student engagement and address misconceptions or learning gaps.

Attendance, engagement, grading, and assessment

In a conventional classroom, teachers can look around the room and see if students are there and engaging in learning. But what happens to attendance and engagement—as well as assessment and grading—when everyone is working from home?

According to a late-June *Chalkbeat* report, "Teachers in two separate surveys estimated that only about 60 percent of their students were regularly participating or engaging in distance learning (individual district reports of daily "attendance" varied widely, as districts defined the term so differently). Two-thirds to three-quarters of teachers said their students were less engaged during remote instruction than before the pandemic and that engagement declined even further over the course of the semester."[32]

Similarly, AEI reported that "by May 29, 63 percent of schools were in districts whose websites expressed some expectation for student participation" in their remote learning program. "Just 9 percent of schools expressly stated that participation is not required, and the remaining districts did not clearly state expectations for participation."[33] According to a survey of 7,200 teachers in nine states, only 60 percent of their students engaged regularly in remote learning, with wide gaps depending on socioeconomic status.[34]
Meanwhile, reported CRPE, only 42 percent of districts expected teachers to collect student work, grade it, and include it in final course grades for at least some students (typically those in middle and upper grades) during the crisis.[35]

Charter network approaches to attendance, engagement, grading, and assessment

The networks that we interviewed had more freedom and flexibility to determine policies and approaches that worked in their own contexts.

Achievement First took attendance not just every day but *every class* and also had students answer a daily attendance question. The network reported achieving a 95 percent attendance rate during the crisis (slightly less than regular school). The network conducted weekly quizzes and unit tests in English language arts, math, and science.

Success Academy achieved a 97 percent attendance rate during the first week of remote school and was able to maintain it in that range over the spring. The network decided to reward students for attending all virtual lessons but avoid punishing them for missing a class, as the pandemic was causing much disruption for many families. Recorded lessons and digital files could help students catch up on missed lessons. According to Eva Moskowitz, Success Academy founder and CEO, "We don't think it's fair for kids who have to be prepared for the next grade to just dispense with grades."[36] See below for an email she wrote to her network community.

Email from Eva Moskowitz to Success Academy families, April 27, 2020

"Two weeks ago, in response to coronavirus, the entire city of San Francisco decided to give every student an A. Seattle followed suit last week, and New York City is currently debating the elimination of grades. These decisions are made in the name of equity, but the outcomes for children will be far from fair. True equity honors the integrity of learning. It ensures accountability for students and educators alike.... The world has fundamentally changed, but the benefits and requisites of education have not. Now is not the time to throw out standards and give up on kids. Today's fourth graders should be ready to do fifth-grade math next year.

The pain and suffering brought on by coronavirus are real, and the hardships families have endured cannot be overstated. Despite this, we cannot wave a magic wand and declare all children achieved mastery. That would cheat students with real gaps of the education they deserve. Instead, we are being practical: revising and simplifying our academic priorities, while also aiming high and being ambitious for our students—loving them dearly and doing everything we can to help them achieve their full potential."

Although Success Academy students were not immune to learning loss during the crisis, the network saw reading growth of 65 percent in grades K–8. In terms of AP exams, 425 high school students took them overall. Of the students taking the AP World History exam, 62 percent scored a three or above, and 28 percent scored a four or a five (much higher than the national averages last year).

Uncommon Schools reported attendance rates of 85–90 percent during remote school, somewhat below their normal rates of about 95 percent.

As was the case in other charter networks, Rocketship's rates of participation in remote learning varied, especially in the early days. By the end of the first week, after a considerable effort to distribute Chromebooks, the network's remote learning participation hovered around 50 percent. So Rocketship doubled down on its daily outreach efforts to find out what families needed to get students going. Weeks later, 90 percent of families were connected, and 80 percent of students were participating in remote learning daily. Rocketship measured student participation in daily Zoom classes and work completion as well as students' progress towards weekly goals. By mid-May, network executives report, student work completion was up dramatically, in some cases even higher than during traditional schooling.

Uncommon Schools measured not only attendance but also work completion (via pictures of work done in elementary school and via Google Classroom in middle school) and assessment data. Their data-tracking system found that more than 90 percent of students were submitting their assignments during remote learning. High schools evaluated interim assessment data during the crisis, including student performance on metrics compared with the previous year, as well as failure rates and college-entrance data.

> "By mid-May, network executives report, student work completion was up dramatically, in some cases even higher than during traditional schooling."

DSST observed a 96 percent daily attendance rate in E-School.[37] Student work during E-School was graded, even though most Denver Public Schools did not give grades during the crisis. The network redesigned its grading system to focus on class participation, quizzes, and formative assessments, including checking pupil mastery at the end of the school day.

IDEA Public Schools continued grading during remote school and monitored grades closely with a dashboard. IDEA decided early on to give an end-of-year assessment during remote learning, even though the states in which it operates (Texas and Louisiana) canceled their state tests. IDEA high school students took 72 percent of the AP tests associated with their AP courses (as of the end of May).

Noble was an outlier among our interviewees: It made grades temporary until January 2021 in order to give students who encountered challenges with health, wellness, or technology access a longer runway.

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As schools prepare for remote learning this fall, adopting normal schedules and grading practices is something they should strongly consider. Yet these actions come with several challenges, as the charter networks found:

- Lesson timing (one network started with sixty-minute online lessons but quickly realized that they were too long, so it transitioned to twenty-minute lessons, followed by a corresponding assignment and optional question time with the teachers)
- Ensuring there are enough opportunities for active learning, class discussion, student feedback, and individualized attention
- Finding the right blend of live and asynchronous learning
- Deciding whether to use a videoconferencing platform (for example, Zoom, Teams, and BlueJeans) for live, interactive instruction or the platform as a webinar in which a presentation is pushed out to students but with the ability to use text chat for questions and discussion (Success Academy started with the former in high school but moved toward the latter after seeing that some of the live sessions became “free for alls,” with students chatting with their peers online)

Action Item #4: Reach out to individual students and families on a regular basis

A strong finding from the interviews was the central importance of regularly reaching out to students and families, including providing social and emotional support and development. This came up in nearly every interview. Most networks had an advisor or counselor system (operating before and during the pandemic), allowing them to check in on student and family needs, provide emotional support, and gather feedback on how remote learning was going among their pupils. One striking observation was how thoughtfully and systematically the networks reached out individually to students and parents, which seemed a rare practice in other schools (or an aspiration deemed to be operationally impractical).

At Achievement First, each advisor had seven to twelve students with whom they connected on a regular basis—that is, an advisory session via Zoom every morning for fifteen minutes during which students set goals, reflect on their progress, ask questions, and share issues with their advisor. Advisors were also responsible for having a one-on-one check-in with every student and a check-in with every family every week to make sure the lines of communication were strong and any issues were being addressed.

At DSST, advisors (responsible for about fifteen students) met with students in the morning to check in on their wellbeing and homework progress, talk about announcements and deadlines, and nurture a personal connection. Advisors had regular virtual lunches with students and played online games to keep it light. At that network, 91 percent of families indicated satisfaction with communication from the network about E-School.

> "One striking observation was how thoughtfully and systematically the networks reached out individually to students and parents..."

Rocketship hosted Facebook Live celebration sessions a few times a day—the start and end of the day as well as lunch (often live virtual lunches with teachers and the principal)—and "bedtime stories" meant to build joy, reinforce core values, and build connection. Rocketship provided a template for teacher check-ins with students and families (for example, asking about how they are doing, whether they have been eating and sleeping well, what they are liking most about their socioemotional learning lessons, and what they will work on today). The network had a Care Corps and regular (at least monthly) virtual "cafecitos" (coffee meetings) with principals and parents. According to Maricela Guerrero, vice president of schools at Rocketship, "We build really strong relationships with our families and with our teams via staff huddles, regular parent coffees

with principals, emailing inspiration and updates, and being transparent with our community. Connections and relationships really matter."

These preexisting systems allowed for rapid reconnaissance so the networks could learn which students needed help with meals, devices, and connectivity; communicate updates to students and families; gather feedback on remote learning; and provide support to students and families.

The networks used thoughtful and frequent communication via all channels (emails, newsletters, calls, in-class announcements, advisor meetings, and parent/teacher meetings) to update students and families on plans and check in with them regarding all their needs (not just educational). Achievement First schools had virtual town hall meetings with the principal and parents to check on how remote learning was going, and the school had a social worker on hand to give parents tips about managing during the crisis and about working with special-needs students. DSST created an "E-School Student and Family Guide" with detailed information about how remote learning would work. DSST also used functionality in Google Classroom of adding a parent/guardian to the student's account so the adults could automatically receive educational updates.

Effective use of data and dashboards

Staying in touch with students and families wasn't just about providing social and emotional support; it was also essential to keeping kids learning. The charter networks are data-driven organizations, and they doubled down on this during the crisis to learn what was and wasn't working, employing clear goals and metrics to monitor, with dashboards that helped educators decide what to keep or change.

The networks leveraged their previous investments in becoming learning organizations that could quickly build pilots, try them, gather data, learn from them, and pivot, akin to the "lean startup" innovation methodology (a method for increasing the success rate of innovative products and services through rapid prototyping and quick feedback loops).[38] This use of data happened at the network school and classroom levels, with educators systematically improving lessons via trials, observation, coaching, feedback, and iterations.

Uncommon Schools employed attendance and engagement tracking systems and monitored online behavior in great detail. For example, between March 30 and May 22, there were 107,641 web users of its K–8 remote learning, with 571,492 unique page views and visitors from forty-seven states and sixty-three countries (because they provided the world with free access to their remote school). There were 479,211 Vimeo video plays and 2,011 video downloads, 72 percent of users preferred desktop computer access compared to 23 percent access via mobile phone and 5 percent via tablet, and the most popular video lesson was its "Grade One Week Four Read-Aloud Task Two."

DSST tracked data on its daily wellness survey via Google Forms to learn about the most pressing needs of its families. It also established E-School goals (for example, that 100 percent of students have access to the hardware, software, and Internet connectivity

necessary to engage in remote learning and 100 percent of students have a daily personal touch point) and then tracked progress against goals via its E-School Goal Dashboard, which had detailed, measurable goals in many categories (such as instruction, student and family engagement, staff engagement, special services, college success, and operations and technology). In its network-managed courses created by master teachers, the network used exit quizzes as mastery checks and compared results across students, including looking at subgroups (and seeing, for example, that learning gaps widened for marginalized subgroups). DSST also used weekly surveys on the efficacy of E-School to learn what was working well or not and established an initial checkpoint for revising its E-School approach only nine days after launching it, then making further improvements. For example, they reduced the number of required modules after realizing that many students were feeling overloaded with having to complete twenty-seven modules a week.

"The network used exit quizzes as mastery checks and compared results across students, including looking at subgroups..."

The Rocketship Goals Learning Management System Platform allowed that network to track student project completion by school and across the network. They used a data table that rolled up attendance and family survey data network-wide and by school. According to Josh Drake, vice president for student services and school strategy, "Our culture is data driven, and we are big on using feedback to support our families. With remote learning, all this continues but only at a faster pace because things are changing more quickly."

Achievement First focused on attendance, percentage of student time on task, student work quality, and various satisfaction metrics tracked in student and family surveys. KIPP DC used an engagement tracker, looking at student assignments and grades (deans contacted students who were struggling) and ensuring that every student is responding to a teacher at least once or twice a week. Noble Network used an engagement tracker and short "pulse surveys" to gather feedback on remote school.

Special education

Maintaining regular communication and providing individualized instruction was particularly important for students with special needs. This was also quite difficult to do well. The following information was gathered by a national survey of more than 1,500 families in May:

- Just 20 percent of parents whose children have an individualized educational program (IEP) or are entitled to other special-education services say that they are receiving those services.
- Of the surveyed parents, 39 percent reported that their children were not receiving any support at all.

- Children who qualify for individual learning plans are twice as likely as their peers to be doing little or no remote learning (35 percent versus 17 percent) and twice as likely to say that distance learning is going poorly (40 percent versus 19 percent for those without IEPs).[39]

Yet there were also positive developments, including many reports that remote learning worked quite well for many special-needs students. Reasons included there being fewer distractions, self-paced learning, ability to watch videos again if something was missed, and more.[40]

Charter network approaches to special education

How did the interviewees approach special education? At DSST, every teacher was partnered with a special-education teacher, who participated in classes with special-needs students along with the general teacher, after which the special-needs teacher would have separate video meetings with students. It was an enormous amount of work to create remote IEPs for all special-needs students, but it paid off: 98 percent of students with IEPs had a completed remote learning contingency plan for E-School in place by May 20. DSST also continued to focus on advanced learning plans for its gifted and talented students in E-School and created systems to ensure students maintained access to appropriate enrichments.

Rocketship was able to launch its integrated special education (ISE) for remote learning in the first week of remote school. Specialists and related service providers quickly revised their schedules such that students with disabilities received live instruction and related services multiple times per week (for example, direct instruction, discussing assignments, coaching, video activities, and wellness check-ins). This level of direct daily contact continued for Rocketship's students with moderate to severe disabilities, as well. Similarly, special-needs services (such as physical and speech/language therapy, social-skills groups, and individual counseling) continued during the crisis. As during in-person schooling, Rocketship continued its meaningful inclusion by having general-education and special-education teachers coteach students with disabilities. By creating dedicated learning communities for special-education teachers and related service providers, Rocketship ensured that its educators were able to share problems, learnings, and best practices rapidly so they could provide robust support for students in this new virtual environment.

At IDEA Public Schools, serving special-needs students during remote learning included the following:

- Continuing IEP meetings as usual
- Providing customized daily schedules for students in RISE units (self-contained life skills units) with a combination of one-to-one (teacher-student), small-group, and self-directed or parent-supported work

- Pairing special-education teachers and interventionists with general-education teachers to offer accommodations and supports for students with IEPs in general-education classes (for example, materials in additional formats)
- Documenting all IEP hours provided per student per day to ensure IEP compliance
- Providing all possible related services via telehealth platforms and, for services (like certain forms of adaptive physical education) that must be in person, documenting hours missed to make up in the future
- Special-education teachers holding and tracking daily check-ins with students and holding office hours twice a week
- Interventionists holding check-ins two to five times a week with critical student intervention program students
- Speech and occupational therapy continuing one-on-one with IDEA therapists via PresenceLearning, a live online teletherapy platform
- Having phone consults regarding adaptive physical education and physical therapy with suggested activities and documenting minutes that will need to be made up when school reopens
- Continuing parent and teacher interviews by phone or video but pausing evaluation until it can be done in person when school buildings reopen

Uncommon Schools started Zoom instruction with special-education students first. KIPP DC kept serving students with IEPs right away, without delays caused by the transition to remote learning. At Noble, supporting special-needs students during remote learning included using their engagement tracker to gauge progress, calling home to check in on basic needs, and using the Remind app to text students and families about appointments and announcements, office hours, and other IEP services.

Of course, there were challenges as well, and the reality did not always match the expectation. For example, some interviewees pointed to an attendance gap among special-education students and English-language learners.

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As for parents, those we interviewed were quite satisfied and appreciative of all their schools and teachers did amidst brutal circumstances. They also reported getting an almost visceral view of the teachers' and school's dedication to their children. Rahwa Abereha, a Rocketship parent (and a front-line worker and mental-health professional), reported, "We're getting more than I expected" with remote school: "They are doing a really great job." KIPP DC found that it had high parent-satisfaction levels with remote learning, according to its family surveys.

More specifically, parents valued proactive communication about remote school and the extraordinary efforts made by teachers and schools (and seeing firsthand how hard teaching can be). New technologies facilitated school/parent communication (for example, reminder apps and online learning platforms that parents can access to view student work, progress, and schedules).

Finding ways to connect with students and families on a regular basis—and not just in groups but also one-on-one—is a charter network practice worthy of emulation. That said, several networks heard from parents at the beginning of the crisis that they felt overwhelmed with the information (and with the workload) and were "drowning" in overcommunication, leading them to dial it back. So striking the right balance is important.

Action Item #5: Embrace a team approach to teaching, with a common curriculum at the center

"Everything is a learning curve in this environment."
– Ava Laub, seventh-grade literature teacher, Achievement First Voyager Middle School

"You're learning everything. It's similar to the first year of teaching but more emotionally draining. Everyone became a first-year teacher again this year."
– Abel Ibarra, fifth-grade STEM teacher, Rocketship Alma Academy

During the crisis, many charter networks (such as Achievement First, DSST, and Success Academy) made innovative use of teaching teams—another interesting and important adaptation made easier by the autonomy enjoyed by charter schools. At many networks, lead planners designed network-wide lessons, master teachers recorded video lessons to be shared network-wide, and some teachers focused on grading and providing feedback to students, while others focused on checking in with families and one-on-one video calls with students to address stumbling blocks. This division of labor allowed networks to deploy teachers according to their skills, strengths, interests, and experience, while also allowing teachers closest to the students to follow up with them in groups and individually, as well as flexibility for teachers with children of their own at home.

At Uncommon Schools, master teachers with the highest student-achievement results recorded video lessons that were used across the whole network in grades K–8, freeing other teachers to focus on small-group facilitation via Zoom, reteaching when necessary, grading assignments, providing feedback, conducting student and family outreach, and holding office hours. At Success Academy, a top grade-level teacher instructed 125 students in multiple live class sessions, with other teachers checking attendance, reviewing student work, providing individualized feedback, and holding virtual office hours.

At Achievement First, co-teachers met daily, handing off the Zoom microphone during live classes, monitoring different Zoom breakout rooms for smaller-group work, and sharing grading responsibilities. At DSST, one teacher facilitated the online learning session, while another managed the technology and focused on the chat comments, after which all teachers analyzed student work.

At Rocketship, Abel Ibarra, a fifth-grade STEM teacher, noted during our interview that his co-teacher might focus on tracking attendance and progress as well as uploading materials while he handled planning and posting assignments. They cotaught live sessions, and she ran word problems with small groups. They met weekly to coordinate. He also noted that his shared experience with his students during these difficult times strengthened his bond with and appreciation for his students: "I'm proud of my students. I love being a teacher. I am extremely proud of their dedication and their strong will to continue school. I've seen them cope and deal with these tough circumstances."

A key challenge during the crisis was clarifying roles and expectations, not just for students and parents but also for teachers. See below for a note sent by Success Academy to teachers at the beginning of remote school.

Success Academy teacher responsibilities during remote learning

"Outside of your advisory and class time, you will spend the remainder of your day working collaboratively with your content and grade team colleagues to plan future lessons, grade student work, and give high-leverage feedback. This includes:

- Review, grade, and give feedback on all assignments.
- Hold office hours for student[s] twice daily via Google Classroom.
- Collaborate with your content team to plan for lesson launches, led by chosen teacher.
  - Teachers leading lesson launch can rotate.
  - Other teachers should still be on the call.
- Keep regular communication lines open with your grade-level colleagues to discuss how students are working remotely and any issues that come up in Advisory. All teachers must work collaboratively to plan lessons, provide feedback, hold students accountable, and support students with their learning."

Teamwork was not reserved for teaching. Many networks created cross-functional crisis teams, coordinating between network and schools—sometimes across multiple states. For example, DSST created an operations team, technology team, instructional team, culture team, family team, social media team, and more to handle different aspects of the crisis, and new teams were created at the building level, too (for example, teams for instruction, staff engagement, student/family engagement, and school culture). DSST teachers at many schools self-organized into teams (for example, a social studies working group and caregiver working group).

The Achievement First network used content teams, each with an academic dean (for example, one for English and one for math), providing support to teachers on virtual-education issues—for example, how to evaluate student work in online education. During remote learning, they observed that they were sharing learnings and lessons across schools

in their network at five to ten times the rate from before the crisis and were seeing more collaboration and sharing of best practices across the different states in their network.

The role of a common curriculum

Before the crisis, many of these charter networks already had in place a strong existing curriculum that they could employ in this new environment. Many are widely known for their centralized approach to curriculum and instruction, as well as a focus on college preparation, closing achievement gaps, longer school days and years, and a data-driven approach to instruction and progress monitoring.

Having a central curriculum and network-wide approach to instruction and teacher training—curricular and instructional coherence and consistent education approaches—allowed the networks to push out a high-quality remote learning program quickly and efficiently while avoiding the problem of asking all teachers to develop their own individual remote learning plans, despite their varying levels of experience and comfort with education technology. With a common curriculum already in place, the networks could save valuable time in flipping to remote. According to one review of organizations and funders working with schools during the crisis, "Schools that have been able to transition to high-quality remote teaching already had a preexisting commitment to high-quality teaching, which includes support for teacher professional development and high-quality content."[41]

An example is Success Academy. In an *Education Next* review of that network (years before the crisis), researcher Charles Sahm noted, "What separates Success, in my opinion, is a laser focus on what is being taught, and how.... At Success, content is king.... The ethos that infuses the entire network: Everything has a purpose. Moskowitz calls it 'joyful rigor.'" He noted their "devotion to content" (and teacher preparation), robust use of technology in classrooms, and the blend of content and skills, including not only rigorous content but also a stress on experiential learning, problem-solving, and critical thinking.[42]

Training teachers for remote learning

With the pandemic, school officials had to figure out what to do about teacher training and professional development, considering how many educators were taxed with sudden unexpected duties, and how to adjust the training to make sure it was relevant to remote learning.

We encountered an array of responses and quality on this front. During remote learning, Achievement First ran morning (twenty minutes) and end-of-day (twenty-five minutes) staff huddles with professional development and to check progress against goals. The network continued its regular Friday professional-development sessions (from 1:30 to 4:00 p.m.) during remote learning, along with an hour each day in which content teachers received training. For example, teachers received training on Achievement First's "Everybody Writes" moments regarding how to use the Zoom chat feature to check student responses.

DSST ran a two-day E-School Teaching and Learning Institute to train its teachers before the launch of remote learning. For E-School, DSST continued its weekly staff meetings and weekly grade-level meetings, with some focused on development and others on planning. One session covered how to develop a strong classroom culture within the first ten minutes of remote learning, with videos to model this so teachers could see it in action.

Success Academy drew upon the robust teacher-training system already in place before the pandemic and adjusted it, while adding new offerings addressing the mental and emotional strains on teachers. During remote school, they held staff meetings daily and departmental meetings three times a week. According to ninth-grade teacher Amanda Levy, "We kept so many systems in place, so we have not lost the essence of Success Academy in this new environment."

Rocketship teachers shared recorded Zoom lessons with their colleagues across the network, and principals used these videos to highlight effective teaching practices. One Uncommon elementary school held grade-level meetings twice a week, grade-span meetings (for example, K–1) as needed, and whole-staff meetings for two hours every Friday to make sure people were on the same page and receiving training or direction.

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Many other schools undoubtedly embraced this form of team-teaching during the crisis, too. With remote learning, it holds great promise. In normal times, many teachers may be used to closing their classroom doors and doing their own thing, given all the demands on their time and their own preferences and observations about their students. But because online lessons can be recorded and streamed at scale, it makes sense to have teachers specialize and to ask more of them to be the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage." That can only be done in schools with a strong, coherent, common curriculum.

Remote learning recommendations for educators

What recommendations can we propose for educators based on learnings from this spring? Here are ideas from our interviews and the related research conducted for this report, including helpful insights from The New Teacher Project and Charter School Growth Fund.[43]

Recommendations: Human factors

1. Focus first on students' health, safety, and wellbeing (for families and teachers, as well).
2. Develop and maintain a school community with positive relationships and a warm atmosphere, along with high expectations for learning and behavior.
3. Start with wellness checks before turning to academic issues.

Recommendations: Remote learning design

1. Take what worked during the regular school year and use it as the foundation for remote learning. Avoid the temptation of reinventing everything simply because the delivery mechanism and context have changed.
2. Maintain clarity and focus in learning approaches. Avoid overloading students and teachers with new technologies, especially at the beginning.
3. Develop clear and strong remote learning design principles.
4. Balance live (synchronous) teaching and flexible learning via independent work and asynchronous learning.
5. Outline clear roles for teachers and parents when it comes to teaching versus support.

Recommendations: Teaching and training

1. Focus on fundamentals (for example, reading as a gateway to learning other subjects).
2. Ensure lessons include many opportunities for active learning, with students engaging directly with the material, instructor, and their peers.
3. Make creative use of teaching teams, with smart use of specialization and collaboration.
4. Provide frequent feedback to students.
5. Leverage peer learning and collaboration tools.
6. Assess students effectively so educators can monitor progress and diagnose where students are and what they need.
7. Offer robust teacher training directly relevant to this new approach.

Recommendations: Management and operations

1. Encourage teachers and staff to maintain a growth and innovation mindset as educators move up the steep learning curve of figuring out how to teach with these new tools.
2. Develop a clear and user-friendly schedule with a balance between routines and flexibility.
3. Gather, analyze, and share data.
4. Make data-driven decisions about instruction and student user experience, with clear metrics and strong data systems.
5. Maintain proactive and thoughtful communication with students and families.
6. Use good technology practices when it comes to data security and privacy.[44]

Epilogue: Are high-performing charter schools models or unicorns?

"In many ways, that is what the coronavirus lockdown has brought us—the opportunity to be a laboratory of innovation, all at the service of our children."
– Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, chief school officer, Uncommon Schools[45]

"[The challenge] was immense, [but it was also] one of the most fun things I have done professionally, because it was an incredibly motivating moonshot."
– Priam Dutta, principal, Achievement First Voyager Middle School, New York City

From the outset, a major aspiration for charter schools was their potential to serve as "laboratories of innovation" for public education itself. This report has been written in that spirit, seeking examples from eight high-performing charter networks that might prove helpful to other schools in the public, private, and charter sectors as they struggle to educate their pupils amid brutal, unprecedented challenges. "With remote learning," noted Eesir Kaur, Rocketship's senior director of humanities and professional development, "we have so many opportunities to reimagine what school looks like."

It's important to acknowledge that these networks had some advantages going into the Covid-19 crisis, advantages that are themselves a challenge to replicate, particularly for traditional public schools. Some arise from the relative autonomy that charter schools enjoy in most places, including freedom from some state rules and regulations and from the constraints of district bureaucracies, collective-bargaining agreements, and local political pressures. Because they report to nonprofit boards rather than directly to elected officials, they can often move more quickly and innovate.

What makes these eight networks particularly special, though, is not that they're charters but that they have leveraged these advantages over the course of decades to become exceptionally effective teaching and learning organizations. They were excellent before the pandemic, so it's no surprise that they excelled in rising to this epic challenge.

We reflect on four attributes that have made these networks exceptional and served them well during the crisis:

1. Strong mission, values, and culture
2. Excellent leadership (including agility in operations and decision-making)
3. Strong talent and teams
4. Vibrant school community and close relationships with families

We address each briefly in turn below.

1. Strong mission, values, and culture

> "Our kids-first value and result-driven culture informed our response."
> **– Sean Healey, principal, Uncommon Preparatory Charter High School, Brooklyn**
>
> "I feel incredibly proud to be part of this organization. We are cohesive in what we believe about how we can help our kids."
> **– Samantha Turner, principal, Rocketship Alma Academy**

During nearly every interview conducted for this report, those interviewed (network executives, principals, teachers, and parents) referred to the organization's mission, values, or culture as being essential to the crisis response. Network executives employed these elements to keep their community together, motivated, and focused on higher aims. Organizational culture was particularly important because it provided the human context in which everything else (teaching, operations, and data analysis) happened.

There was remarkable consistency across many networks in how they translated their core values to this new environment while building on the strong foundation they already had regarding clarity of purpose, desired outcomes, and an unshakeable commitment to great teaching and effective learning.

Achievement First espouses these core values at its schools: Lead for racial equity, strive for excellence, embrace challenge, care for the whole person, choose joy, and go further together. In its remote learning plan, Achievement First wrote that its commitment was "to channel our values into a full effort of meeting the needs of our scholars, families, and staff in a way that—when this crisis has passed—will make us PROUD of how we showed up and defined who we are." All the core values were directly relevant to Achievement First's efforts to create quality remote learning programs and a tightknit remote community during a crisis and served as clarion calls to the team. "Times of crisis are when you most need your values," noted Dacia Toll, CEO of Achievement First.

DSST has six core values, including "courage: We embrace the opportunity and obstacles to do things differently with excellence" and "doing your best: We give our best effort in difficult circumstances." Again, those values directly informed expectations for the entire

team about how to behave during the crisis. DSST included this note with its March 25 E-School plan:

DSST E-School: Our opportunity in this time

- We are faced with an entirely unexpected, new reality.
- This is an amazing opportunity to do something new.
- The circumstances are challenging.
- We will lead with our core values, optimism, and grace.

E-School vision: DSST will build an E-School centered on fulfilling our mission, engaging our students through relationships and values and providing a high-quality DSST education virtually. We will do this by embracing the opportunity to create something new, adopting a learning mindset, measuring what matters, and continuously improving together.

Network executives at Uncommon Schools noted that their mission ("to close the achievement gap and prepare low-income students in grades K–12 to graduate from college and achieve their dreams") was more important than ever during the crisis. One of their values is the following: "Caring: We take care of each other. We notice when someone needs help and we lend a hand." This value animated the approach Uncommon took during the crisis, as the network strove to support its students, parents, and teachers and maintain a school community that was in it together.

2. Excellent leadership (including agility in operations and decision-making)

> "DSST at heart is still an entrepreneurial organization. Everyone saw this as an entrepreneurial opportunity. We had fun being in startup mode again. An entrepreneurial spirit reignited. We are moving at lightning speed.... We are a way better organization today than we were ten weeks ago."
>
> **– Bill Kurtz, CEO, DSST Public Schools**

A great way to predict the quality of response by schools during the pandemic was their preexisting organizational health: Was the school already high functioning with regard to teaching, learning, vision, strategy, culture, execution, alignment, innovation, and agility? All of this, of course, is in large part a function of excellent leadership.

During any crisis, one must ask whether leaders were able to diagnose the problems quickly and marshal their teams to make quick but smart decisions about ways forward in the swamp of uncertainty. Were they able to adjust their priorities and pivot their operations on a dime? Did they spend time tending to the organizational culture and helping staff

succeed, or did they just put out fires? Were they overwhelmed by chaos and just coping, or were they rising to the challenge with renewed commitment, even seeing opportunities amid all the hardship? Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel, once famously quipped, "Bad companies are destroyed by crises; good companies survive them; great companies are improved by them."

We know from the research and practice of leadership that effective crisis leadership involves a host of difficult actions: showing humanity and grace under pressure; seeking credible information from a diverse array of experts; forming a brilliant crisis response team; communicating reality, urgency, and hope; being present, visible, and available; maintaining radical focus; making big decisions fast; empowering leaders at all levels; restoring psychological stability (not just financial stability); using purpose and values as a guide; creating a sense that people are all in it together; building operating rhythm with small wins; maintaining a long-term perspective; and anticipating and shaping the "new normal."[46]

We have also known for a while that school leadership is an essential aspect of school quality, including student learning. According to a 2014 study, "an exhaustive review of over 300 studies of school leadership…concluded that among school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school, leadership was second only to classroom instruction."[47] A Bridgespan report noted that skilled management is the single most important determinant of organizational success in nonprofits, a category that includes charter networks.[48]

> "We have also known for a while that school leadership is an essential aspect of school quality…"

Strong leaders set the right tone. That includes not only the chief executive but also the senior management team, the board, principals, managers at all levels, and people "leading from below" (that is, without formal authority).

Many of the networks studied here have invested considerable time and resources in developing management and operational excellence and efficiency. Their preexisting clarity and alignment around school design principles, mission, values, vision, and culture allowed them to reduce decision time dramatically. According to Uncommon Schools CEO Brett Peiser, "We are big believers in RAPID decision-making, and this was really helpful during the crisis."[49] This approach started their effort on the right foot: "It was great seeing the national leadership competence and the commitment to doing this well," noted Sean Healey, principal of Uncommon Preparatory Charter High School in Brooklyn. "It was refreshing to get a call during that week of uncertainty, amidst the frustration of not knowing. It felt good to have someone say, 'We're going to get going. We're going to start with remote learning.' There were fast cycle times. Every day has been an adventure."

DSST decided to go all in with a quality E-School instead of hedging its bet and wondering if schools would reopen after a couple weeks. According to CEO Bill Kurtz, "DSST is a high-trust organization. Trust is the most important commodity you have in a crisis. With trust, you can move much more quickly. We have to amplify and build on trust." One of the defining

elements of the DSST school model is effective central management, along with the importance of excellent school leaders in creating the conditions for teacher and student success.
These networks occupy an organizational space somewhere between mom-and-pop charter schools—some of which lack in resources, economies of scale, and cutting-edge practices—and traditional school districts—some of which can be bureaucratic and slow to adapt due to frustrating layers of rules, regulations, politics, and collective-bargaining agreements that can make it difficult for administrators and educators to be responsive and nimble. The charter networks come not only with the autonomy embedded in chartering but also with some centralization that allows them to make quick decisions, such as about remote learning design principles, teaching teams, and revamped calendars, and then drive those decisions across their schools, which are already aligned in their commitment to educational excellence and strong bonds between teachers, students, and families.

This sets up an effective division of labor between the network and its schools, with the network shouldering the tasks of vision, communication, device distribution, and designing and executing remote lessons via master teachers, while its schools can focus on their relationships with students and families, scrutinizing and following up on student work, grading, giving feedback, re-teaching, and more, without having to reinvent curriculum on the fly. This division of labor is not without cracks in which some things get lost, but overall it is a tremendous asset in a crisis.

3. Strong talent and teams

All the networks had previously made big investments in attracting, vetting, and developing talent as well as teambuilding. These investments paid off during the crisis, in part by providing robust operational and management competence as well as teamwork. Preston Smith of Rocketship noted, "We have a great team. This crisis brings our mission to life and reveals the team's commitment to our core principles. The team has been incredible."

For years, Uncommon Schools has had a robust and methodical approach to educator training and development, including two to three weeks of summer training, half a day each week devoted to professional development, an annual two-day retreat for all school leaders, an annual operations training program, home-office professional-development workshops, and extensive use of one-on-one coaching to drive improvement. Sean Healey, principal of Uncommon Preparatory Charter High School in Brooklyn, said, "This is the most exceptional group I've ever worked with. I have great confidence in them. I'm proud that I was part of a group that was able to maximize student learning during some really tough weeks."

Achievement First notes that "the number-one way we deliver on our promise to students" is this: "We develop great teachers and leaders." Achievement First principals participate in a two-year residency before leading a school. New teachers have five weeks of summer professional development. All teachers and leaders work with a coach, who provides individualized feedback and support. Achievement First kept its robust coaching in place during the crisis, with leaders giving feedback on Zoom instruction and engagement, just as they did before the crisis.

About a decade ago, Success Academy launched its own teacher-preparation program ("T-school"), with five weeks of training for new teachers and two weeks for returning teachers. New school leaders also take a four-week course. Its approach to hiring, training, and development is methodical, and a few years ago, it launched an online institute to share its practices and approaches with the world.[50]

4. Vibrant school community and close relationships with families

> "Schools are in the center of the pandemic. We are people's first call when something happens.... We're also going to start the day with...all of the homeroom students together.... We want to make sure that they continue to feel a part of a learning community."
>
> **– Jessica Sie, director of literacy and history, Success Academy**

Schools are communities, not just places of learning. We saw how humanity, grace, and love rose to the surface during the pandemic. This was a top finding from the interviews: the focus on humanity and community, the giving and receiving of grace during times of struggle; the bonds between teachers, families, and youth engaged in the shared purpose of education; and the common challenge of overcoming hardship together. The charter networks had a strong sense of community among teachers and families before the pandemic, and it helped them navigate the crisis. As noted above, most of the networks had an advisor or counselor system (operating before the crisis), facilitating close bonds between school and home.

Achievement First focused on both remote learning and remote community. They were able to maintain their sense of community through their advisor system (with regular contact between teachers and families) and creative gatherings such as virtual social lunches, game shows, dance parties, yoga classes, step team practice, and college-acceptance celebrations.

DSST kept its community strong in no small part through its advisory system but also engaged an outside partner to lead some additional relationship touch points with families, such as a wellness day for staff and parents, with virtual yoga and Bollywood dancing classes. "We give each other, and ourselves, grace during this time," noted Libby Brien, school director of DSST College View Middle School. "We give flexibility, and we will all work through this together."

Rocketship ran daily virtual assemblies via Facebook Live for its schools and held online talent shows. One school principal pointed out during our interview that the crisis made us all realize how precious school is, noting that when we were away from it for so long, so many people missed it.

> "Family engagement is no longer optional. While we all know how important it is to engage families, the relationship between home and school changed dramatically when remote learning began. Family partnerships became essential. Schools needed parents more than ever before, and for many parents, the reverse was also true.... The most successful schools we saw were those that prioritized building authentic relationships with families, as opposed to those whose outreach strategy consisted mostly of demands."
> **– Kerri Briggs, Trent Kaufman, and Mavis Snelson of the Cicero Group**[51]

Another key factor was the central importance of close relationships with students and families. According to Uncommon high school principal Sean Healey, "Our kids are incredible and very resilient. They said, 'Let me dive in and embrace this.' That was grounded in relationships where the students know the teachers and staff really love them." Tameka Royal, principal of Uncommon Schools' North Star Fairmount Elementary School, noted, "During the crisis, we saw beautiful acts of teacher commitment to their students and schools."

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In sum, these networks entered the Covid-19 crisis as highly effective organizations, with clear values, excellent leadership, talented teams, a coherent curriculum, systems that support student success, and vibrant communities with close relationships. We should not be surprised that these would be powerful assets in the sudden switch to remote learning.

What's the takeaway? In the short term, we should do all we can to help every school take the actions that have allowed these networks to be so successful. At the same time, let us pause to acknowledge and celebrate the policies that have enabled high-performing charter networks such as these to emerge. At a time when so many U.S. institutions appear to be struggling or failing to meet the moment, here are examples of organizations that are not just surviving but thriving. Surely we should want to see them replicate and grow so they can serve even more students, families, and communities that choose them.

Author's postscript

From this first, painful chapter of this story of how a pandemic wreaked so much havoc so quickly in our families and schools, we can take solace and inspiration from the bright lights out there finding ways forward. We have much to learn from them. In this report, we tried to capture for posterity their herculean efforts and distill findings and recommendations that can help all schools and teachers going forward.

Meanwhile, the story continues. We do not know how many chapters there will be. The coming school year may be another difficult one, perhaps brutal. Summer brought a brief respite, but there are scars from the spring and a slew of questions about the fall, with complicated scenario planning.

It was easy to miss in the spring, but this pandemic has been a teachable moment for all of us, especially students. The stakes are high, and our children are counting on us to fight this mighty battle well, devise the best plans we can muster, learn and adapt as conditions change, and keep them safe, well, and supported, even as we bounce between modes of schooling. There is no way to know how long this season of adversity will last. In the meantime, we must figure out how to honor our promises to our schoolchildren.

Appendix: Methodology

Through qualitative research, the goal of this project was in-depth understanding of how leading charter networks have responded to the Covid-19 crisis with remote learning initiatives. How did they manage the transition from traditional schooling to remote learning? What enabled them to respond as they did? What worked well, and what didn't work well?

For this project, we conducted interviews with and research on the charter networks, as well as research on school districts and public schools from research reports and media articles for context, from May to July 2020.

The researcher created four different interview templates, according to the type of interviewee: network executive, school principal (or another administrator), teacher, and parent. The researcher used semi-structured interviews, which allowed new ideas to be raised during the interviews.

The researcher conducted interviews with forty people for this report. The goal was to do quick research in the spring that could be published in the summer so it could be helpful for educators in the fall. The researcher chose the charter school networks to be studied in close collaboration with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Determinations were made based on our sense of which charter networks had developed robust remote learning programs that we could learn from, based on initial press reports and findings from research organizations such as CRPE, as well as consultation with other experts at different think tanks and funding organizations.

The networks were chosen in part for various types of diversity, such as geographies served around the country, and different grade spans (for example, elementary versus K–12). All the networks chosen had a fairly large number of schools, in some cases operating across multiple cities and states. The researcher chose the four types of people to be interviewed, and then the charter networks decided which people would be made available for interviews, given their roles and schedules.

Most interviews were conducted one-on-one via one of three different videoconference platforms: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or BlueJeans. A couple interviews were conducted by phone, and one was conducted via email. Some interviews were conducted with a small group. The interviews with network executives and school principals took about an hour, on average; teacher interviews took about forty-five minutes; and parent interviews took about twenty to thirty minutes. The researcher took detailed notes on every interview, in some cases quoting the interviewees directly, but did not record the interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher solicited feedback on the interview templates from staff at the

Thomas B. Fordham Institute. After the interviews, the researcher reviewed the notes to look for themes and important points of agreement and disagreement. On many interview questions, we achieved saturation and redundancy in the responses.

Delimitations

This research focused on the responses of leading charter school networks to the pandemic with their remote learning programs, as well as the responses of some school districts and public schools nationwide for context. Interview questions included asking about the following: what worked well; top challenges; access to technology, devices, and connectivity; equity issues among students; approaches to elementary versus middle versus high school; teaching; teacher training; education technology tools; opportunities to improve education in regular classrooms in the future; and more. This research is not nationally representative and does not make claims about which networks were better or worse or about whether charter public schools responded better or worse to the crisis than district public schools. The report did not focus on private schools or schools that were already virtual schools (also called "online schools" or "cyber schools").

Limitations

This research was limited by a compressed time frame. It was conducted during a crisis, and many of the professionals we interviewed were quite occupied with running their schools or classrooms, limiting their available time. The interviewees mostly had to rely on their memory, unless there were relevant documents or reports about their remote learning plans or operations. Their perspectives may be biased (unintentionally or not) or lacking important context, given their roles in their organization, and they may have wanted to present their organization or work in a positive light. When possible, the researcher checked claims for accuracy, but in this situation, much of the data (for example, about the number of devices distributed to students) is by necessity self-reported, without the possibility of an independent audit.

Here is the list of the forty people interviewed, along with their affiliations and titles:

Achievement First

1. Dacia Toll, CEO
2. Chi Tschang, regional superintendent for middle school
3. Priam Dutta, founding principal (and parent), Achievement First Voyager Middle School[52]
4. Ava Laub, seventh-grade literature teacher, Achievement First Voyager Middle School
5. Emma Pierre, parent

DSST Public Schools

1. Bill Kurtz, CEO
2. Libby Brien, school director, DSST: College View Middle School
3. Adeel Khan, school director, DSST: Conservatory Green High School
4. Lauren Heil, high school computer-science teacher
5. Melissa Tran, middle school social studies teacher

IDEA Public Schools

1. JoAnn Gama, cofounder, CEO, and superintendent
2. Mika Rao, vice president of communications[53]
3. Gerald Boyd, principal, IDEA Harvey E. Najim
4. Victor Leos, parent

KIPP DC

1. Adam Rupe, senior director of marketing and communications
2. Andhra Lutz, principal, KIPP DC College Preparatory
3. Amy Drake, principal, KIPP DC Connect Academy

Noble Network of Charter Schools

1. Ellen Metz, head of schools
2. Ben Gunty, principal, Noble Street College Prep
3. Monica Avalos, teacher and English-language learning specialist, Noble Street College Prep (also a Noble alum)

Rocketship Public Schools

1. Preston Smith, cofounder and CEO
2. Eesir Kaur, senior director of humanities and professional development
3. Elise Hill, associate director of communications
4. Josh Drake, vice president, student services and school strategy
5. Maricela Guerrero, vice president of schools
6. Samantha Turner, principal, Rocketship Alma Academy (and rising director of schools)
7. Abel Ibarra, fifth-grade STEM teacher (and rising assistant principal)
8. Rahwa Abereha, parent

Success Academy Charter Schools

1. Eva Moskowitz, founder and CEO
2. Ann Powell, executive vice president, public affairs and communications
3. Jessica Sie, director of literacy and history
4. Amanda Levy, ninth-grade pre-AP world history teacher, Success Academy High School of Liberal Arts
5. Travis Brady, high school science and engineering teacher

Uncommon Schools

1. Brett Peiser, CEO
2. Barbara Martinez, chief media officer
3. Tameka Royal, principal, North Star Academy Fairmount Elementary School
4. Sean Healey, principal, Uncommon Preparatory Charter High School

Charter School Growth Fund[54]

1. Kevin Hall, president and CEO
2. Caroline Kemp Lopez, principal, Impact Team
3. Ebony Lee, executive in residence

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54. Charter School Growth Fund is not a charter school network; rather, it is a Colorado-based nonprofit philanthropic venture capital fund that supports the growth of public charter schools and charter networks nationwide. We chose to meet with them (virtually) and learn about their perspectives from their comments and their own internal documentation because they work with so many charter networks nationwide and already had a lot of information about their remote learning programs.