# COVID-19: Engaging Connecticut's At-Risk and Disconnected K-12 Students during Distance Learning

## What's at Stake: Opportunities, Challenges and Consequences



There are many unknowns in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic such as how to best keep people healthy or how long social distancing guidelines will be in place. There is, however, one thing that we know for certain: A staggering number of Connecticut students are being left behind in the wake of the rushed transition to online learning.

Out of necessity, schools were quickly transitioned online with little notice, resources, or training. Teachers, many of whom had never been exposed to online teaching platforms, have been forced to revamp teaching methods and brainstorm strategies for learning. Families are reaching out with mixed results to districts in an effort to support students with established special education needs. In an environment of constantly moving targets,

teachers and students alike are trying to maintain some sense of academic consistency and focus, though many on both sides are ill-equipped for success. This is especially true in poorer and largely minority communities where the most vulnerable students live.

Consider: In March, before schools were officially closed by the governor's order, every elementary school student in Glastonbury was loaned an iPad pre-loaded with the learning platforms needed for distance learning. Those who lacked internet access at home were provided a connection by the district.

However: In Bridgeport, some teachers prepared worksheets and assignments that were sent home with students. It was not a coordinated effort on the part of the district and was inconsistent across schools, grades,

and even teaching teams. The majority of students went home empty-handed, with little direction on how to continue their schooling.

The disparity in online engagement will further deepen the already existing achievement gap between poor and affluent students. In Connecticut, 13.5% of children under the age of 18 live below the poverty level. This number, taken at face value, belies the true crisis that exists within the state's education system. In Glastonbury, the number falls to 2.2% while in Bridgeport, 30.4% of children live in poverty. As Ian Rosenblum, executive director of The Educational Trust – New York, put it: "The pandemic is an educational equity crisis for vulnerable students who were too often underserved by our education system in 'normal' times."

Given this reality, the state has an obligation to consider the inequity in education through the new lens of distance learning and to create a state-level positive systems disruption.

The first step in this difficult endeavor is to recognize that there must be a coordinated, statewide movement toward education equality. This must include a plan for how to connect with students who have become disengaged and have "fallen through the cracks." It must also happen immediately. In the two months since physical schools closed, teachers report that significant numbers of students have not participated in online learning at all and many more are struggling to maintain regular participation. The state must coordinate a way to track, contact,

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and engage these students and their families, for the longer they are disengaged, the further behind they fall. Dedicated effort must take place at the state level to determine innovative policies to ensure children are able to respond and connect to the educational process. This work cannot be delegated to districts with disparate resources.
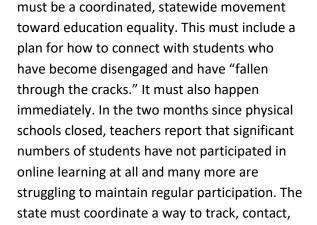
This long-overdue effort has become even more crucial by the upheaval caused by the current pandemic. As it is currently delivered, distance learning is focused on meeting basic academic goals but falls short of providing a "whole-student" educational experience. In order to enable the success of every student in Connecticut, the statewide policies should include creative technical and adaptive changes to the educational, mental health, and human service delivery systems. Working together with mutual vision, the State and community organizations can best support the education, health, and wellness of our Connecticut children.

Without this type of coordinated effort at the state level, the recent thrust into distance learning will deepen the longstanding educational disparity gap. The State of Connecticut owes all students the opportunity for academic success, regardless of race, income, disability, language, country of origin or sexual identity. Without the development of such policies before the end of this school year, the effects of this education equality crisis will far outlast the current pandemic.

## Measures that Promote Engagement

While the full range of strategies that can ensure ALL students participate in, and benefit from, distance learning is beyond the scope of this document, the following foundational guidelines can help educational systems achieve greater engagement:

1. Work toward universal minimum standards that address not only network and device access, but go beyond connectivity and provide tutorials, technical support, and navigation assistance. Specifically, school systems should strive for one device per student, avoid tech-free options, and establish community hotspots. Public-private partnerships can help schools achieve these standards.
2. Ensure a meaningful level of human interaction during the school day, both teacher-student and peer-to-peer, that balances asynchronous and synchronous contacts. Relationships are the key to engagement.
3. Use instructional materials, platforms, and strategies that accommodate diverse learning styles.
4. Increase flexibility. Be flexible with deadlines and missed work. Provide choice and flexibility in online assignments.
5. Adapt accommodations to make instruction universally accessible. Ensure that closed captioning is available and identify assistive support technology that will help students with special needs.
6. Create rituals and routines in the online environment. They are important to maintaining structure and cohesion for everyone, but especially developing children.
7. Have multiple methods of communicating with families, including two-way communication feedback loops. Share multiple level levels of information, e.g., student progress; school and district activities, practices, and policies; resources for families, etc.

Application of these guidelines will necessarily reflect the range of resources and capabilities that exist at the local level. Yet, strong state guidance and policy could reduce the need for intervention.

## Identifying Students Who Need Support

A consistent and ongoing process of identification is critical to a successful engagement effort. Schools have multiple ways to identify vulnerable and at-risk students.

### *Data and Reporting*

- **Historical data:** Reviews of official records – including IEPs, attendance, and discipline – as well as teacher- and staff-reported concerns can help identify students who are most at-risk in the distance learning environment.
- **Common definitions:** In order to identify students who are not optimally participating in distance learning, Connecticut would benefit from common definitions and uniform measures of attendance and participation in a distance and/or hybrid learning environment. These should include the types of instruction and interactions students are receiving online (e.g., group-individual, live-recorded, audio-video).

- **Information sharing:** Schools can use existing structures, such as attendance review teams, or create new ones for monitoring attendance and online participation. In addition to regular data review, these teams should have consistent ways of receiving reports from teachers who are concerned about a student's distance learning participation.

*School-Home Interactions*

- **Catalysts:** Early warning systems can enable teachers and schools to intervene early if students are struggling or disengaging. Strategies can include emotional "temperature" or "pulse" check surveys, as well as task- or performance-based triggers.
- **Online learning:** Students have new avenues for communicating in the distance learning environment (e.g., email, chats, inside Google documents, etc.). Teachers and schools should have strategies for monitoring these communications for red flags and requests for help.
- **Parent communications:** Technology affords the ability to monitor connections (e.g., confirm that emails are opened and read) and allows for identification of families who may not be connecting/getting messages.

## Meeting Students' Needs

*Making Contact.* School administration should designate specific staff contacts for students identified as being at risk. Contact information for these students should be saved in a shared document to help ensure proper outreach and follow-up occurs. Office hours outside of the regular school day should be offered to ensure that all families can have access to support/resources. Staff should employ a multi-modal approach including phone calls, email, text, app, newsletter, live virtual events, etc.

*Screening.* During phone calls and other contacts, screening should occur and may include brief assessment of needs related to IT, basic needs, and mental health. Individuals who are conducting outreach should have a detailed list of school resources that are available for students and families and should also be trained on how to access and use other resource directories, including 211.

*Tiered Response.* The information used to identify students along with additional information collected through outreach should be used for risk stratification to ensure that interventions and supports are aligned with students' needs.

## Interventions

- **Getting connected:** Provisioning and tech support teams should be formed and deployed to ensure that unconnected students can access Google Classroom and other platforms needed for online learning.

- **One-on-one contact:** Match an identified engagement person with students who need support with online participation or performance. This could be a teacher or other school staff, or community partner employee. The support person should do regular check-ins using a live connection with video, if possible.
- **Family-centered approach:** Schooling from home increases the importance of understanding and addressing familial factors influencing engagement. Whole-family interventions (parent education, basic needs assistance, case management, etc.) will require enhanced procedures for conducting and tracking referral, linkage, and follow-up.
- **Differentiated learning:** The online learning environment affords greater opportunities to match assignments to students' readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning. Schools can begin to develop alternative learning pathways and tools that support engagement for students who are not succeeding in distance learning.
- **Mental health.** The increased private and commercial coverage of telehealth and the CARES Act (Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Fund) resources that can be used for mental health mean that every student who needs treatment should have access. Schools should take steps to increase awareness and facilitate connections to care.
- **In-home support:** Some students and families will need and welcome in-home services despite the pandemic. State and district administrators should dedicate resources and develop clear criteria and guidance for home-based tutoring and education therapies.
- **Summer:** Every effort must be made to ensure that no student ends the school year not having been contacted by staff and with no connection to a summer program or community provider. Schools should direct CARES Act resources to summer academic and support services to ensure that students are prepared for the next school year.

***These interventions work.*** In mid-April, a principal contacted his school's collaborating community organization with a concern about at-risk families who were not taking advantage of free meals offered by the district. Several families received much-needed supports as a result, but one case in particular shows how life-altering such intervention can be. One household on the principal's list included a single mother raising five children (three under the age of 4 and one with special needs). When phone calls and texts went unanswered, the agency sent a letter to the family explaining available services. A week later, another text was sent to follow up and a care coordination call was scheduled. When that appointment was missed, the coordinator tried unsuccessfully several times to reach the mother. After some time, the mother contacted the care coordinator using her neighbor's phone and said that her phone had been disconnected due to nonpayment. The organization was able to assist her with the bill so that phone service could be restored. A subsequent basic need screening

revealed that two of the children were sleeping on a makeshift bed and the family did not own a table where they could eat their meals, so the coordinator worked to have beds and a small dining set delivered to the house. Distance learning necessities were also lacking. The children were not able to participate in academics because the only available internet access was through the mother's phone. The coordinator helped the family access discounted internet services and also worked with the school to get each student a Chromebook. Through this intervention the family was also connected to an in-home program to support the child with developmental delays. Through these efforts, the family is connected to a local care coordination program and one of the school clinicians has regular check-ins with the family.

***Partnering with Community Organizations.*** The Village for Families & Children (The Village) and Clifford Beers are two community organizations that are collaborating with their local schools to support students. Key factors in developing these relationships include:

- **Defined leadership and communication channels:** Both parties should agree on who will own the relationship and who can communicate progress and challenges to improve the experience.
- **Formal agreements:** Formal agreements such as a memorandum of agreement (MOA) should be in place and signed by leaders of both entities. MOAs would include the scope of the partnership, the purpose of the collaboration, timeline for involvement, data sharing plan/agreement, reporting requirements, confidentiality and privacy protections and cross-training opportunities.
- **School-wide assessment:** Community partnerships should enhance existing school-based service delivery models and help fill in the resource and service gaps based on the needs of the school. To that end, a school-wide asset map could be completed to articulate current school capacity and gaps.
- **Referral protocols:** Schools can use parental notification methods to create opt-out protocols for referrals to community partners. In practice, however, school personnel making a referral should attempt to personally contact the parent to obtain consent.
- **Professional development and consultation:** Community partners can provide training and advice to school leaders and staff to increase their capacity to support students.
- **Social determinants:** Partnership with community providers can facilitate helping families navigate community resources and access the full range of supports/services.
- **In the classroom:** When in-person classes were being conducted, staff from community partner organizations (e.g., positive youth development, mental health) were engaged in classrooms in a range of capacities. Schools must make it possible for providers to join virtual classrooms to provide immediate assistance or extra support.
- **Shared IT platform:** Having an accessible, shared IT platform will prevent unduplicated services and encourage communication between partners.

## Call to Action

Effective student and family engagement is paramount to tackling the educational equity crisis for vulnerable students who were too often underserved prior to the pandemic. CSDE should, in partnership with stakeholders, develop and publish guidance and toolkits for engagement. At a minimum, these must address:

- Distance learning reporting requirements that include standardized definitions.
- Prioritizing social-emotional learning.
- Protocols for identifying and making contact with at-risk students and families.
- The need to differentiate engagement efforts by age, developmental and disability status, and risk.
- Models and direction for partnering with private local agencies, while protecting privacy.
- Professional development in the area of student engagement.
- Expanding care coordination to holistically address students' needs.

***We can't wait:*** We must nimbly mobilize to engage with the population of students who are struggling or who have not yet participated in distance learning.

## About the Contributors

The Village for Families & Children (Hartford) and Clifford Beers (New Haven) are nonprofit providers of behavioral health and family-strengthening services. Each has established a unique partnership with their local district through which staff provide mental health, social-emotional learning, case management, care coordination, and/or positive youth development programs in multiple public schools. In their communities, they are a part of the multi-tiered system of supports for students. Through their firsthand experience, The Village and Clifford Beers were motivated to speak out about the current challenges and opportunities facing students and families. This document was developed in collaboration with a broader Educational Advocacy Group that includes participation and support from the following:

- AFCAMP
- The Center for Children's Advocacy
- Commission on Women, Children Seniors, Equity & Opportunity
- The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance
- Connecticut Legal Services
- Greater Hartford Legal Aid
- New Haven Legal Assistance Assn.
- Office of the Child Advocate
- SEEK CT (Special Education Equity for Kids)