# When a Pandemic Becomes a Cure:
# Urban Districts Addressing Inequities During COVID

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Rochonda Nenonene, Ph. D.

University of Dayton

## Abstract

The COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020 has done many things. It made the world stand still. It has brought illness and death; face masks and quarantine; furloughs and shutdowns. It has also, given the planet a chance to heal, which graced us with cleaner air (Chen et al, 2020; Liu et al., 2020), bluer seas (UN News, 2020) and fresher perspectives on the personal/professional life balance (Perlman Robinson & Curtiss, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).  For schools and educators in the United States it has clearly revealed and intensified the disparities and inequities that exist within the American educational system. Additionally, disparities in food insecurity, access to quality childcare, affordable housing, stable family structures, and the growing digital divide have been magnified in urban and rural school settings (ICSU, 2011 & Mihaly et al, 2018). In response, school districts nationwide quickly established thoughtful and innovative responses to mediating the needs of students and their families. This paper will share cases demonstrating what districts accomplished and call for these practices to continue beyond the current crisis, as they are exemplars of culturally responsive collectivist practices that effectively responded to social emotional and academic growth needs of students (Hammond, 2015).

*Keywords*: educational disparities, culturally responsive pedagogy, equity, social emotional learning

The world was not prepared for COVID -19. A deadly virus that brought an abrupt interruption to daily routines (Tull, 2020), paralyzed economies (Nicola et al, 2020), and disrupted normal life for everyone on the planet (Perlman Robinson & Curtiss, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Schools faced daunting challenges at the beginning of COVID shutdowns and these difficulties increased as they began to fully understand the lack of basic necessities and access to resources that many urban families struggle with daily (Karpman et al., 2020, MacGillis, 2020). Districts were tasked with continuing to provide educational and social services while utilizing modalities and platforms in which they had little to no expertise amongst their faculty and staff (UNESCO, 2020).

One irony, quickly recognized, has been the reality that in this 21st century the world has never been more technologically advanced: with a wealth of programs, platforms and capabilities. Yet, when faced with the need to provide educational services online, school districts were found to be inadequate in terms of infrastructure, management and delivery of virtual services (Selwyn et al., 2020). In spite of these challenges and unprecedented obstacles school districts were able to plan and respond in meaningful and impactful ways that enabled the teaching and learning process to continue as well as respond to the social emotional needs of students and families. This paper will share cases that highlight district actions taken to address needs and deliver services. Additionally, this paper, calls for these practices to continue beyond the current crisis. They are exemplars of culturally responsive collectivist practices (Hammond, 2015) that effectively responded to the social emotional and academic needs of students (Walker, 2020)

## COVID-19: Inequities Exposed

Urban school districts have historically contended with challenges that make the delivery of a quality education difficult (Anyon, 1997). Not impossible, just difficult (Anyon, 2014). The frequently researched challenges of poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, abuse and neglect and access to quality healthcare are a few of the major factors that impact student wellbeing and academic achievement. These factors have also influenced the manner in which districts deliver services and allocate resources. The arrival of COVID-19 and the abrupt closing of schools had the potential to overwhelm urban school districts that were already overtasked and under resourced. A report by the Economic Policy Institute stated, "The pandemic has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put low-income students at a disadvantage relative to their better-off peers" (Garcia & Weiss, 2020. p. 2). Large urban school districts such as Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), experienced unprecedented levels of disengagement from students after schools closed due to the pandemic.  In a report released by the LAUSD, during the time period of March 16 through May 22, on "an average day only about 36% of middle and high school students participated online. About 25% logged on or viewed work only. And about 40% were absent" (Beutner, 2020). Additionally, when disaggregated by race, it was identified that, "more than 50,000 Black and Latino middle and high school students in Los Angeles did not regularly participate in the school system's main platform for virtual classrooms" (Beutner, 2020).

Student engagement and attendance has been a long-standing challenge for urban districts (Marsh, 2019). The pandemic intensified these problems as parents, many deemed essential workers, struggled to adjust working schedules, secure safe and consistent childcare and find agencies to provide meals and other forms of assistance to help support the needs of the families

(Adams & Todd, 2020). The strain of identifying safe spaces coupled with housing and food insecurity attributed to many students failing to show up ready to engage in the newly created models of distance learning. The pandemic clearly demonstrated the fundamental importance of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Critical to understanding and responding to student disengagement and absenteeism is the need for districts to recognize that the physiological and safety needs of students and families must be met first. By neglecting this priority, they will fail at helping students achieve the goal of self-actualization that comes from being fully cared for and well educated.

Another inequity, magnified by the pandemic, is the well-known, but unresolved matter of the digital divide. For students of color and those living in high poverty areas there is a stark and steadily growing gap between them and their more affluent and white counterparts when it comes to access to technology. (Becker, 2000; Riel, M. & Fulton, 2001 & Riel et al., 2002). In a Pew Research Center Poll, conducted during the peak of the first COVID-19 shutdown it was noted that, "59% of parents with lower incomes who had children in schools that were remote at the time said their children would likely face digital obstacles" (Vogels, 2020).

To fully understand the gap, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 14% of children ages 3-18 do not have internet access at home. This translates into 9 million school children struggling to log on for virtual school or complete assignments online (NCES, 2018). Furthermore, among children ages 3-18, 17% live in households without a laptop or desktop computer (NCES, 2018). This means that 11 million students don't have a computer for online learning at all (U.S. Census, 2020). Additionally, the data show that disproportionally the largest groups impacted by the digital divide include Native Americas (65%), Blacks (35%) and Latinos (30%) respectively (U.S. Census, 2020).

Finally, food insecurity is a significant factor impacted by COVID-19 school shutdowns that deserves consideration. The accessibility and dependability that federal school food programs provide ensure that adequate food is provided to America's children.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) mandate is "to provide nutritious meals to low-income children for free or at a reduced price" (Potamites & Gordan., 2010, p. xi). These two programs, designed to be a part of America's social safety net, play an important part in meeting a priority need on a daily basis. In fact, Potamites and Gordan (2010) identified that children from food-insecure and marginally secure households were more likely to eat school meals and received more of their food and nutrient intake from school meals than did other children.

The federally funded "National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides lunches to 29.4 million children daily at a total cost of $14.1 billion" (USDA, 2020b). In 2019, 5 billion lunches were provided with three-fourths of the lunches provided for free or at a reduced price (USDA, 2020b). The availability of the NSLP and SBP for urban districts is critical. Based on the demographics of most urban school districts, the majority of these districts are able to provide free breakfast and lunch to their entire student population (Rogus et al., 2018). Considering the magnitude of the food programs and their ability to reach and nourish so many of America's children, it is easy to understand how detrimental the closing of schools would be to the daily lives of students and families.

**Districts Respond in a Time of Crisis**

Faced with the abrupt mandate of closing schools, the task of identifying appropriate virtual learning platforms and the need to preparing teachers, students and families for a new way of schooling, many urban districts, in the midst of the COVID crisis continued to take on the

task of meeting the ongoing needs of their students and families. They redesigned procedures and protocols, reallocated funds, partnered with local and national nonprofits and businesses, provided resources and technology, made home visits, embraced and utilized social media to make sure that academic and social emotional needs of their students and families were met.

Districts did these things out of care and compassion and with the full understanding that schools serve as a "core institution" in the community. Being a core institution has always been a role schools have served under the full service school model (Adelman & Taylor, 1991; Anderson et al., 2019 & Dryfoos, 1994). The stated goal of a full-service model is to "provide comprehensive academic, social, and health services for students, students' family members, and community members that will result in improved educational outcomes for children" (USDOE, 2018). Due to their responses throughout the pandemic, districts have experienced a renewal and reinvention of how their core institution role is viewed and assessed.

In an ironic turn of events, the pandemic and the subsequent responses have begun to remedy some of the perennial challenges that have faced urban districts. Although this is a hopeful trend it is not intended to suggest that these improvements can resolve the multitude of challenges that prevent urban districts from providing a quality educational experience for every student. There are serious issues facing urban districts that require analysis, intervention and action. The remainder of the paper will focus on providing examples of how urban districts have begun to reemerge as a core institution in the communities they serve by responding effectively during a crisis.

The exemplars presented detail how two urban districts responded to inequities exposed by COVID-19. All of which were previously identified and examined in the paper: student disengagement and absenteeism, the digital divide and food insecurity.

**A Profile of Two Districts**

The districts highlighted are both located in an urban city in Southwest Ohio that has experienced the economic downturns that many urban cities have faced. "The median household income in the City is $28,745 with 34.5 percent of the population living below the poverty line. In comparison, the median household income in Ohio is $50,674 with 15.4 percent living below the poverty line" (ODE, 2018, p. 6). The continual closing and relocation of major industrial and automotive manufacturing companies out of the city, coupled with the financial recession of 2008 (Kalleberg & VON Wachter, 2017) greatly impacted the workforce and economic viability of the city. As a result, many families have experienced a loss in wages, homelessness, food insecurity, health challenges and mental issues associated with poverty and the loss of a steady income.

"District 1" is an urban district similar to many urban districts across the nation that are currently facing challenges on both the academic and political fronts. Academically, prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, the district was given the overall performance rating of "D" by the Ohio Department of Education (2019). Although it is a low evaluative score, it was received by the district as a step in the right direction when compared to previous performance ratings of "F", meaning "Academic Emergency" (Kelley, 2018).

Politically, the District 1 has contended with having the distinction of being the Ohio school district with the largest percentage of charter school students (26%) within district boundaries (Elliot & Hershey, 2006). This issue of charter schools coupled with the emergence of school vouchers (Elliot & Hershey, 2006) has significantly impacted the District 1 student population. During the 2019-2020 academic year, the daily student enrollment for District 1 was "12,467" (ODE, 2020a). Of this student population: "64.6% are African American; 23.8% are

White; 5.9% are Hispanic and 5.1% are classified as Multi-Racial" (ODE, 2020a).  Additionally, those students classified with a disability are at 17.7% and English language learners are at 10.2%" (ODE, 2020a). Importantly and dishearteningly is the number of students in District 1 classified by the state as "economically disadvantaged stands at 100%" (ODE, 2018). These statistics demonstrate that District 1 is facing the same issues that most urban districts face: low student academic performance, high poverty, growing diversity, and an increasing number of students with special needs.

The profile of "District 2", a charter school district located within the school zone of District 1, mirrors that of District 1 as it serves the same population and by law can only accept students who reside within the District 1 school zone. District 2 was created in collaboration with a local university and offered as an alternative to the large urban district school in terms of offering a high-quality education to underserved student populations. District 2 advertises itself as, "open-enrollment, high performing public charter school serving 1,300 students K-12 who live in [the city's] most underserved communities.  [District 2's] three campuses are singularly focused on helping children from the city… gain the skills they need to be successful in college and beyond" ([District 2], 2020a).

Although District 2 attracts students from the same area as District 1, the results in academic achievement for students are a stark contrast. Consistently, District 2 has produced strong academic achievement results with the latest rating of "B" from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE, 2020b). Of course, the student population size for District 2 is one of the variables that make it a more manageable in terms of teacher student ratio and allocation of resources. However, it cannot be denied that District 2 serves the same demographic as urban schools and faces and the same educational challenges in terms of the success of the student. By

the numbers, District 2 has a total student population of 1289 students. 93.7% African American, 2.1 % White, 1% Latino/Hispanic, 3 % other racial categories (Multiracial, Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern). Students classified with a disability are at 7.8% and students classified as economically disadvantaged are at 62% (C. Shoecraft, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

The districts understand the context in which they are tasked to provide a quality education for all students, as well as respond to the social emotional needs of their students and families, Both districts have allocated significant resources and developed initiatives that are designed to support the community in their roles as core institutions. Many of the programs and outreach efforts that the districts have engaged in have clear connections to the theoretical frameworks of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Gay, 2010; Hammond,, 2015 & Ladson-Billings, 1995) and social emotional learning (SEL) (CASEL, 2020). Recently, Jagers et al. (2019) proposed the concept of "Transformational SEL" (p. 163). Their approach combines the frameworks of CRT and SEL with the goal of recognizing the potential of organizations to fully recognize, be in solidarity with and empower those whom they serve. Specifically, Jagers et al. state, "the concept of transformative SEL is a means to better articulate the potential of SEL to mitigate the educational, social, and economic inequities that derive from the interrelated legacies of racialized cultural oppression in the United States and globally" (2019, p. 163). Furthermore, in connection to fully operationalizing CRT and SEL, they contend "practitioners can use if they seek to effectively address issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination" (2019, p. 163).

Both District 1 and District 2 responses during the COVID-19 school shutdown and at the start of the new academic year can be identified as Transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2019) in action. What follows now are examples of what these two districts did to fulfill their role as core institutions during a crisis.

**Two Districts – Exemplars of Best Practice**

Student absenteeism is not a new challenge for urban districts. District 1 has a chronic absenteeism rate of 21.8% (ODE, 2020b) and District 2 a rate of 6.9% (ODE, 2020c). While the attendance/engagement numbers during the COID-19 for both districts are difficult to identify. District 1's superintendent stated that, "a very large number of students were not as engaged, and about 5% didn't log on at all from March to May" (Kelley, 2020). For District 2, absenteeism online was minimal, but the district did face lower levels of engagement which prompted the district to implement summer programming to help prevent further academic slides (Kelley, 2020).

Two major factors that contributed to student absenteeism during the pandemic was the availability or lack of technology and access to the internet, the digital divide manifested. Access to technology is a national problem with, "59% of parents with lower incomes who had children in schools that were remote at the time said their children would likely face digital obstacles" (Vogels, 2020). NCES data indicated that 9 million school children struggled to log on for virtual school or complete assignments online (NCES, 2018). This was the reality for both districts. At the time of the shutdown, neither district provided one-to-one technology for all students. While many of their suburban district counterparts had already instituted this practice, which allowed for an easier transition to virtual schooling (Harper & Milman, 2016; Holen, Hung, & Gourneau,

2017 & Ilomäki, L. & Lakkala, 2018). The cost factor associated with one-to-one technology has been the deterrent for many urban districts.

*We Want You in School.* Recognizing that todays' PK-12 students are a combination of Generation Z and Generation Alpha, they are considered digital natives. Characteristics of these generations include: an average use of technology for "3 hours and 38 minutes a day,"; use of social media as a means of seeking "authentic stories" and an expectation of "on-demand content" for context and information processing (Jenkins, 2017). This understanding coupled with the fact that virtual platforms were the only feasible way to deliver education in a safe manner during the pandemic, districts responded to student disengagement and absenteeism through mediums with which students are most comfortable. In order to use technology, educational platforms and social media to engage students and increase attendance, the digital divide had to be addressed simultaneously. Thus, District 1 and District 2's responses to student disengagement & absenteeism and the digital divide will be discussed together.

For District 1, the first action taken in the absence of technology was to provide the traditional take home packets, which family members picked up and returned to schools once completed. Additionally, lessons for all grade levels where available for viewing on the district's online learning website and TV channel (District 1, Schools Update, 2020 March 13). While packets were being utilized the district conducted a survey to assess students' access to computers and the internet. After collecting the survey data, the district reallocated funds in order to purchase laptops for students. For students in grades PK-11, laptops were provided 1 per household for families of 5. The district strategically placed school bus "wifi hotspots" throughout the city and developed a schedule, widely shared with families, so that students would know when the "bus hotspot" would be in their area and enable to connect and log on to

the school's virtual platform in order to complete and submit work, correspond with their teacher and read any messages from the district (District 1, Schools Update, 2020, April 5). High school seniors in District 1 were given priority in terms of technology and access. As there was a need to ensure that the graduating class could fulfill state requirements on time. The district provided all seniors with a laptop and their own personal hotspots (District 1, Schools Update, 2020, April 5).

District 2 found itself in a different position in terms of technology when the COVID-19 shutdown began. The district had an active one-to-one technology program for middle and high school students already in use. This enabled the relatively smooth transition for the middle and high school students to full virtual schooling. The elementary school is where the challenge came. Similar to District 1, take home packets were utilized until the district purchased technology for the lower grade levels. Differing from District 1, once implemented, District 2 provided one-to-one technology for all elementary students, which included providing hot spots and in some cases the installation of free home internet systems to families through support from local business partnerships and foundations (Bush, 2020). The distribution of technology for District 2 was able to be handled at a faster pace and in a more comprehensive manner as charter schools have greater discretion in terms of allocation of funds. District 2 has stronger donor support to provide resources to ensure they achieve their mission of sending every student to college. The size of district also improves their ability to fully provide technology for the students they serve.

Both districts recognized that providing technology is not the cure all for absenteeism and engagement. In an effort to encourage attendance online and engagement they employed multiple strategies (abbreviated list):

- Teachers conducted home visits, some in person and others utilizing Zoom and Google Meet, to check in on students and encourage them to stay connected to school (D1 & D2).

- Teachers called students and families to check in if students did not show up online (D1 & D2).

- Sent weekly updates informing families of resources and supports for students. (D1 & D2). Additionally, throughout the pandemic, D1 distributed all communications in the various languages represented by students and families in the district.

-  Developed and sent well produced videos providing updates to parent and students on the COVID-19 Response, state recommendations and preparation for Fall School Openings (D1 & D2).

- Developed and sent well produced "how to" videos on using technology, access resources and supporting the needs of the learner (D1 & D2).

- Conducted several parent and student surveys to gage needs and interests (D1 & D2). In response to survey data, changes were made to homework load and grading policies (D2)

- Challenged students in all grade levels to complete activities and experiments related to curriculum and posted student video responses on their social media platforms (D2).

- Facilitated 31 summer book groups (lead by older students) for elementary students (D2)

- Conducted virtual town halls on Instagram and Facebook to answer student and family questions, highlight student success and deliver real-time updates (D2).

- Elementary principals held nightly (virtually) book readings that students could view online.

- Created a virtual/remote learning section on district website to keep parents informed, permit easy access to needed platforms for students and parents, offer technology support, provide a FAQ information section based on anticipated and previously asked questions, coordinate food service distribution and communicate with a unified message to the community (D1 & D2)

- Held socially distanced, drive-thru celebrations for families: elementary awards/virtual promotion ceremony, Juneteeth celebration with parent volunteers for voter registration and census recording (D2).

- Virtual Spirit week, weekly extra credit challenges via FB, Social Emotional related meditation sessions, virtual college tours and maintained weekly "House" student town halls to maintain student morale and recognize student achievement and engagement (D2).

Both districts experienced drops in student engagement and attendance initially. However, once targeted actions were put in place to identify disengaged students and communication plans were created to maintain consistent contact with students and families, attendance and engagement increased and became level (D1) and eventually surpassed (D2) pre COVID shut down attendance rates.

*We Will Feed Anyone Who Shows Up.* In 2019, 13.7 million Americans experienced food insecurity (USDA, 2020a). Thus, for many Americans the reality of "food insecurity means

that at times during the year, households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food" (USDA, 2020a). During the pandemic shut down, families in the city faced losses in wages due to layoffs, furloughs and the inability to receive unemployment benefits. These losses all lead to higher-than-normal levels of food insecurity. Once again, both districts in their role as core institutions, took measures to support students and families that went beyond what is expected to ensure that families in the city had their basic needs met.

Traditionally, as a part of the National Breakfast and School Lunch Program, schools provide free lunch to students whose family's income is at or below the federal poverty level. The program also runs during the summer so that students have access to food year-round. Typically, this federal program does not support meals for adults, but in response to the pandemic and the loss of income experienced by so many families, the parameters were changed to include free meals for school-aged students and their entire families. Immediately in response to the COVID-19 shutdown, both districts went to work coordinating meals and resources to support their school community as well as the city community as a whole. All their actions helped to alleviate food insecurity in the city.

District 1 took a strong lead in the community by getting food and household goods to those in needed. In the beginning, the district maintained the daily breakfast and lunch distribution at strategically identified schools in the city so that students and families could choose the location closest to their home. For those unable to travel or who had no transportation, families could request delivery via a request form on the district website and a district employee would deliver. This practice of daily meals and deliveries was utilized for a few weeks, and once it was determined by the state that schools would remain virtual for the

remainder of the school year, the district implemented a weekly pick-up system that included breakfast and lunch for students. These meals were offered with a selection of options for pick up locations or deliveries.

It was during this time of supporting the community with just in time meals, that the district adjusted work expectations of administrators, teachers, staff and all district employees to the role of what could be considered essential workers in their support of students, families and the community. All district employees did their part: sorting and packing meals; distributing meals at drive through pick up locations; making home deliveries to families; collecting donations for various food banks; calling families whom they had little or no contact with to check if there was a need and sharing locations of regional food distributions to get larger food provisions for the month. In addition to the district employees supporting the efforts to feed families, the district enlisted community volunteers to assist with meal packaging and distribution. COIVD-19 safety measures were put in place regarding who could volunteer. All necessary measures were put in place during distribution periods to keep everyone safe from transmission of the virus.

The distribution plan was judged as highly effective as District 1 thoughtfully created an inclement weather plan while also creating a partnership with the local Regional Transit Authority (RTA) to provide free round trip bus rides on Wednesdays, the designated weekly pick- up day (District 1, 2020a). These weekly food distribution days also became a location for local food banks to distribute food and basic goods to families (Mador, 2020). The district was successful in forming many partnerships such as this so that families were not only able to get food for all school age children, but for the entire family. Speaking to the importance of District 1 coordinating with local food banks, a partnering organization shared that, "some of the school

districts may be concentrating on just getting the kids some food…We're looking at ways as the food banks to make sure there's food in the entire household so everyone has access to meals" (Mador, 2020). This is evidence of District 1 actions functioning as a core institution.

District 1 maintained the weekly distribution of food even after the academic year ended. The strategic locations for distribution expanded to include churches and community centers. Furthermore, during this time, meals were offered to any person under the age of eighteen and the presentation of a student id or the presence of a student was no longer required to pick up the weekly meal pack. This action on the part of the district was welcomed, supported and advertised by many local nonprofits (MCCDC, 2020 & Hall Hunger Initiative, 2020)

District 2 was just as impactful in their contributions to feeding students and families. Following a similar pattern of meal distribution by days and subsequently transitioning to weekly food distributions. District 2 also partnered with local food banks to deliver additional food and basic goods to families. Through these partnerships District 2 was able to coordinate and offer the distribution of daily hot meals via a drive through pick up for any person in the community, with no restrictions.

A point of distinction between District 2 and District 1 was Districts 2's ability to also gain support from local businesses and foundations. Receiving a substantial donation of $400,000 from an influential forward thinking foundation, District 2 was able to distribute over 260,000 meals during the months of April through July 2020.  They continued feeding 1,134 District 2 families consistently over the summer in the largest food distribution operation in the district's history (District 2, 2020b). A parent testimonial speaks to the difference the consistent meals made for her family,

"At the start of the pandemic I lost my job and was out of work for three months. You can be living in a nice home, driving a nice car and suddenly, you can't afford food to feed your family. When you're down, you really see who is there for you and [District 2] has been there for my family. The fact that [the elementary principal and District 2] staff even thought of doing this for [District 2] families…well, there aren't even words to show my appreciation. The food was amazing. Everything in those boxes was food that we loved and we ate every bit of it. All I could do was cry every time we went to pick up our box. Cry, and thank God for [the elementary principal]. I really saw her heart—she exemplified the love and passion she has for her students with every box of groceries she served." (District 2, 2020b. p. 7)

Additionally, District 2 informed eligible families about applying for the states' supplemental Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer Program (P-EBT). A program through Job and Family Services which provides financial assistance to any family who is eligible for free or reduced lunch. The program offered up to $302 in food benefits per child for the months during the pandemic during the time in which in person schooling was closed.

District 2 demonstrated it was nimble in responding to the needs of its stakeholders. It redesigned processes, created new programming and connected families to resources that helped to sustain and nourish them during the pandemic. District 2 took on the responsibility of being a core institution during a crisis and accomplished it in a way that was authentic to their mission and core values.

## Cures for the Future

Both District 1 and District 2 used their core institution status to bring together volunteers, agencies and foundations to support the well-being of children who are often overlooked, marginalized and viewed from a deficit perspective. They supported the needs of students and families while continuing to provide the best possible education in a virtual setting. In the midst of a crisis both districts were able to establish protocols and procedures that can be viewed as best practices and should continue regardless of the context. Forming and maintaining meaningful connections with students and engaging them in a modality that fits their generational norms is key to guiding students to academic success.

Each district demonstrated ingenuity and compassion in meeting the physical needs of the community. Through their actions, embodied the African proverb that, *it takes a village to raise a child* and, perhaps took it step further by showing us what Chilean writer Isabel Allende meant when she stated, "if families prosper, the village prospers and eventually so does the whole country" (n.d.). The lesson learned from the work of the districts is that these practices should be standard operating procedure for all schools. Although a pandemic was the impetus for such meaningful work and support of the community, the actions taken demonstrate that schools can and must assume the important role of core institutions that attend to the academic and social emotional needs of all stakeholders. This would require a re-allocation of funds and redesigning of traditional job responsibilities. However, it has the potential to reduce serious deficits that exist with urban school districts and lead to more positive outcomes for students academically and personally.

The examples detailed illustrate the power and impact schools can have when they step up to the challenge of responding to needs that sometimes exceed the realm of what is traditionally expected from schools. When schools work in the best interest of students, families and communities they solidify their roles as core institutions. Such commitment builds caches of respect that can be garnered to improve the quality of education, produce academically stronger graduates and increase the likelihood that the schools will have the support of the community. The work presented here reveals that from pandemics cures can arise.

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