

## Helping children, families weather COVID-19 vital to education

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While 2020 is over, I'm still yearning for normalcy ... for the sound of small voices and screechy sneakers in the hallway of my school, the Oliver Wendell Holmes Innovation School in Boston. In my role as a City Connects coordinator on the student support staff I have had to learn how to connect with and support students and families from afar. I see hundreds of students every day online. I help them access the things they and their families need or opportunities they could benefit from — from food to dental care to child care and anything in between to help them succeed academically.

Informal check-ins have been moved to Zoom, coffee breaks with colleagues have migrated to a standing online meeting, and communications with students and their families happens over the phone or computer. Based at the Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development, City Connects works to connect students with resources to meet their nonacademic needs and strengths. Backed up by research, we know that kids in City Connects schools get higher grades and test scores than their peers, have higher attendance rates, and that as they get older, are less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to enter and graduate from post-secondary institutions.

These results are life-changing for the students we serve but for me, entrenched in the day-to-day work, the core of City Connects is relationships. Every year, we meet with teachers and discuss the strengths and challenges of every student in our schools and tailor a plan of support for each one. Then we work with families, school staff and community partners who

find ways to build on kids' strengths and address their challenges, creating a web of support and opportunity around each child. In our school, 86% of our students have high needs; 77% are economically disadvantaged; 30% are homeless; and all qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Those are last year's numbers. This year, the pandemic is bringing new waves of poverty and illness that are not yet quantified.

Because my colleagues and I already had extensive knowledge of our kids and their families, we have been able to offer personalized and urgent support when needed. Parents email me letting me know "I've run out of money," "I can't buy food, and I can't pay my bills." When I could help address a problem, I did. When I needed the support of my school colleagues, they pitched in. During this winter, for instance, my colleagues and I were concerned with the rise in numbers of our homeless families, and worried that our usual community partners would not have the capacity to respond to those families' needs. In response, my colleagues and I launched a donation drive, contacting local businesses and eventually securing more than \$3,000 in donations and 45 gift bags containing food, clothes, toys, books and winter gear for those families. I've delivered work packets to children without internet service and teachers at my school have visited students' homes to get them logged on to Zoom.

I have seen school staff perform countless other acts that are not viewed as going "above and beyond" but rather as a part of our job. I miss doing this work face to face, seeing a child come into school with a new winter coat I helped him to get, seeing a smile on a face that has worn too many frowns, seeing a struggling reader begin to read fluently because of her



teacher's skill and my help to coordinate community resources to make sure that she had food at home, and got needed new eye glasses. Every child and their family has specific needs that existed before COVID-19 altered or created new circumstances for them. When I think about returning to school, it is my hope that I will again be able to see my students roaming the halls, dropping into my office to say hello, or quietly mentioning a challenge at home. It is my hope that the stronger relationships we've built with families through Zoom and home visits will continue to grow. I believe that, in spite of the frustrating challenges that COVID-19 has caused my colleagues and me, that when school returns, we will be better positioned to support our students than ever before because of new relationships — with students' families, new community partners and others. It is through new and established relationships that we will rebuild a better system for all of our students.



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