COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

In a short time, the Covid-19 virus has radically changed the lives of children, youth, and families. Schools and early education and care programs are closed, parents and caregivers are losing jobs, and the social and community activities and supports that we all rely on are now at a distance or inaccessible. Recent weeks have seen a rush of adaptation and innovation as schools, districts, early education and care programs, and states adjust to the Covid-19 pandemic closures and find ways to continue to serve students and families whose needs and circumstances vary widely.

This brief highlights tactics in use to address comprehensive needs, and then looks at how -- in this time of unprecedented upheaval -- policymakers and practitioners can assist children and youth with comprehensive services key to their wellbeing, healthy development, and learning -- now, and in the months ahead. This resource is informed by teachers, social workers, and school counselors, superintendents, policymakers, news reports, information provided by organizations dedicated to serving children, and research on child development and learning. It will be updated periodically to reflect the latest developments.

Access to Food

Schools and districts sprang into action, even as they awaited permissions from the US Department of Agriculture, to ensure that school closures would not force the children in their communities to go hungry. Common solutions include:

- Grab and go meal pick up at designated times and school locations

- Delivery of meals to neighborhood bus stops at designated times

- Delivery of meals door to door, usually targeting families in special circumstances such as a disabled parent or without access to transportation

- Expansion of eligibility for meals to any family with a child, whether or not they were previously enrolled or have school-aged children -- making food available to families of infants and toddlers

- For state-by-state information on how to serve and access meals, go here.

Access to Technology

In a high-speed effort to make virtual learning and connections to the school community possible for all students, actions include:

- Surveying families to determine who is in need of a device

- Allowing students to check out or borrow a device

- Partnering with corporations or philanthropies to rapidly procure devices

- Purchasing and distributing hot spots

- Parking a bus with WiFi in a community

- Assisting families with WiFi sign ups

- Providing pre-paid cell phones with minutes and high-speed data to families and youth with no other means of communication, so that students can access assignments

- Partnering with local PBS affiliates to provide educational television programming

- Creating packets of academic materials to be picked up or delivered for students for whom technology access remains a barrier to learning

- For some guidance on online learning during the Coronavirus pandemic, see this and this. The Institute for Education Sciences will report out on effective distance learning strategies in April.

Outreach to High-Priority Children, Youth, and Families

Schools and districts are aware of students who have special education needs, are learning English, are homeless, have significant behavioral health needs, are at risk of dropping out, or are otherwise identified for priority attention. In recent weeks, there have been efforts to:

- Make contact with students and families

- Coordinate outreach to students by coaches, afterschool providers, or other key people with relationships to the students and their families

- Centralize collection of information about specific student and family needs, and designate staff responsible to follow up on those needs

- Assist with the setup of telehealth and telepsych connections to providers

- Identify technology enabled supports that may help specific students with Individualized Education Plans, such as videoconferencing with academic specialists, tele-therapy, or use of transcription services

- Communicate in multiple languages. Keep in mind that immigrant families may experience unique concerns, questions, and barriers

- A resource on outreach to homeless students during the Coronavirus is provided by SchoolHouse Connection here. An overview on outreach to immigrant and English language learning children, youth, and families is here. Guidance for LGBTQ students is here. Resources from the National Center for Learning Disabilities can be found here.

Access to Health and Necessities

Schools and early education programs are keenly aware that for many of the children, youth, and families they serve, mundane threats to dignity have transformed in the Covid-19 pandemic to more serious threats to health and wellbeing.

- Coordinate with community partners to access and distribute necessities for hygiene such as soap, hand sanitizer, and toiletries

- For early learning programs, develop community and philanthropic partnerships to provide families with access to diapers, wipes, formula, clothing, books, toys

- Centralize pick up of food and necessities at shared locations to minimize trips or establish regular delivery times

- Distribute information about Covid-19 prevention, symptoms, and how to care for someone who is ill. Discuss with parents, caregivers, and older students plans should they become sick

- Connect students to emergency health and dental services that remain open, if needed

Access to Virtual Social Connections, Enrichments, and Social-Emotional Supports

- Make daily contact with children and youth
- Make regular contact with families
- Survey families using tools like Google Forms
- Create virtual classrooms, lunch times, small group discussions
- Create virtual book clubs, arts clubs, music clubs, sports clubs
- Create virtual spirit weeks, story times, poetry slams, theatrical readings
- Create virtual parent and caregiver coffees or support groups
- Create virtual advisories, social skills groups
- Use the U.S. Mail to send notes to children, youth, and families, or have them correspond with one another
- Hold age-appropriate discussions that address social-emotional issues
- For a good resource on children's social-emotional wellbeing during the Covid-19 crisis, see this by Child Trends and this resource for helping children cope with disasters from the Centers for Disease Control
- For ways to maintain relationships during school closures, see this from Edutopia and for examples of using technology to stay connected with students, look here.

What State and Local Policymakers Can Do

Mobilizing at the local level is important, and federal relief is critical, but efforts can only be effective if city and state leaders assist. Across the country, a range of efforts are underway including:

- **Appropriating funds** to address critical needs arising from the pandemic. As of this writing, 20 states have taken fiscal action. See this tracker from the National Conference of State Legislatures for more details.

- **Expanding access to food.** As part of the federal Covid-19 relief package, states can give all low-income families extra funds to purchase food on ATM-style cards for use at retailers and farmers markets. For more on how to launch "Pandemic EBT" see this resource from the Education Trust. States are seeking an array of waivers to expand the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women Infants and Children (WIC) Program, as well as establishing Disaster SNAP responses. For more see this from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and this article on state actions from Roll Call.

- **Expanding access to health care.** Emergency waiver authorities can be exercised under Medicaid, CHIP, and Medicare. For an overview of specific federally approved waivers by state in response to the Covid-19 crisis, see this resource from the Kaiser Family Foundation.

- **Expanding access to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).** States have flexibilities to use TANF for children, youth, and families. For more see this guidance from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

- **Expanding access to Unemployment Insurance and Small Business Loans.** The federal Covid-19 relief bills expanded access to unemployment benefits to include gig economy workers and the self-employed, made certain UI benefits more generous, and provided significant funding for small business loans and grants. States can use flexibilities afforded in the new federal laws and create their own small business relief funds. Local leaders can create partnerships with community organizations, provide information to eligible families, and make referrals.

- **Creating emergency child care** and enrichment centers for the children of essential workers and preserving delivery system capacity. The Alliance for Early Success provides an overview of state actions here.

- **Recognizing student support staff as essential personnel** and providing for continued pay and/or additional hours.

- **Incentivizing income and employment.** Expanding the social safety net is key, but policymakers can also incentivize employers to maintain payroll and benefits, and keep families attached to jobs. The U.S. Small Business Administration provides one [example](#).

- **Addressing eviction and foreclosure.** A wide array of federal, state, and local actions seek for forestall evictions or foreclosure for some period of time. An overview can be found [here](#).

- **Investing in domestic violence prevention and response.** Social isolation and family stress are risk factors for domestic violence, including [child abuse](#). Support local hotlines and shelters to respond now and in the future to the anticipated increase in cases.

- **Eliminating bureaucratic barriers to resources.** Federal and state governments have been waiving requirements in an effort to make health care, food, and other resources more accessible during the Covid-19 crisis. Be on the lookout for additional opportunities to streamline or eliminate bureaucratic barriers in order to be responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families.

- **Negotiating with suppliers** to improve access to needed resources. Often discussed in the context of needed Personal Protective Equipment for frontline workers, state and municipal government can also play a role in helping to address critical shortages of items like diapers, formula, hygiene products.

- **Assisting with identification and coordination** of governmental-, community-, and school-based resources.

- **Facilitating effective and efficient deployment** of resources available through government and community-based agencies, such as by creating uniform intake forms and protocols for responding to emergency needs or concerns that arise as teachers, social workers, and others are in direct contact with children, youth, and families

- For an overview of various state actions, see [this](#) update from the Pew Charitable Trusts. [Here](#) is some guidance from the U.S. Conference of Mayors. For support for municipalities applying for [federal aid](#), see [this](#) initiative from Bloomberg Philanthropies. For an overview of district actions, see [this](#) resource from Chiefs for Change.

What School and Local Leaders Can Do

In this time of change, students' and families' needs will also change unpredictably and without many of the usual outside relationships and resources in place. Many students and their families will lose supports and services becoming even more at-risk, while others will face hardships, stresses, and risks for the first time. The sudden disruptions to daily life and rising stresses due to the virus, job losses, and isolation mean that almost all students are going to be experiencing challenges that may interfere with their wellbeing and readiness to learn. The research-based actions described below can help to mitigate these widespread challenges and create the [best conditions possible](#) to help all of our children, not only survive, but thrive -- as we emerge from this crisis.

Universal: Each and Every Student

There is no time like the present to extend support to all children, youth, and families, not only those previously identified for priority attention. Researchers have long [recognized](#) the benefits of combining a universal "public health" approach to student support, alongside a "clinical" or more targeted approach. To do this, school and program staff can:

- Ensure daily contact with each and every student and regular contact with families

- Tap a range of personnel to do so. In addition to the key role of teachers and school counselors, think about systematically and intentionally deploying school or program staff like principals, directors, coaches, librarians, music specialists, ESL and literacy specialists who may have relationships with students and families or be known to students and families and able to make a connection

Customized: Account for Varied Impacts and Needs

The experience of [poverty](#), and the experience of the Coronavirus, varies widely and can change over time. Each students' experience during and after the crisis may require differentiated supports.

- Provide guidance to teachers and staff in touch with students and families about what they should ask

- Create a survey tool or intake form to aggregate information and ensure that limited resources are dedicated to the areas of specific need experienced by children, youth, and families, as well as to enable targeted connections to the specific subset of supports appropriate to that child or family

- Establish protocols for how teachers and staff should follow up regarding needs and concerns that may arise. Be clear about steps they should take if they are concerned about students or caregivers showing signs of depression, suicidal ideation, abuse or neglect

- Create a central repository for information

- Be clear about who has responsibility for follow up

Comprehensive: A Range of Supports

Child and youth wellbeing and readiness to learn is influenced by many factors, and there are a range of supports that may be especially important at this time. Whether children and youth are in or out of schools and early education and care programs, they are continuing to learn and develop in all domains including: physical health/wellbeing, social/emotional/behavioral, academic/cognitive, and family. To address a range of needs:

- Clarify your organization's capacity and role. Assess which domains your organization can cover and whether your organization will provide information, make referrals, assist with paperwork to secure benefits, and/or ensure delivery of necessities

- Organize information about available resources according to domain. For example:

  - Physical Health and Wellbeing: food, health care, dental care, hygiene products, virtual sports clubs or fitness activities

  - Social/ Emotional/Behavioral: social connections, social-emotional learning opportunities, virtual social skills groups, telehealth and telepsych connections with providers

  - Academic/Cognitive: access to needed technology, access to teachers, specialists, tutors, and enrichment resources

  - Family: access to income supports including food through SNAP or WIC, Unemployment Benefits, Small Business resources, TANF, access to eviction prevention, domestic violence, or other services

- Establish partnerships as needed to best serve students and families

Coordinated: Across Family, School, and Community

Needed supports may be available through the school, community-based organization, or a government agency.

- Create a central repository of information about available services, resources, and benefits, particularly as new information and closures rapidly reshape the landscape of options available. Consider organizing this information by domain.

- Assist with access to and coordination of services across school, community organizations, and government agencies to the extent possible

- Track the set of services and supports identified for each student, and the status of referral or delivery

- Ensure ongoing follow up and feedback

These steps would help to serve children, youth and families in the most effective and efficient way possible during this pandemic. They also lay a foundation for necessary and ongoing supports to address the needs of the "whole child" so that children and youth can be ready to learn and engage in school when the health crisis abates and the economic and social impacts become clear. For more on evidence-based, effective, and cost-efficient systems of integrated student support see this and this and this.