LESSONS FROM CHICAGO:
School Community Reflections on Navigating the Shift to Remote Learning at the Break of COVID-19

Insights from a LEAP Innovations Listening Exercise

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Background

On April 13, 2020, when Chicago Public Schools officially began virtual instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers and students did not have access to the resources they needed for the sudden change. About [one in five] children across the city, especially in majority Black or Latinx communities, did not have home broadband nor the technology devices to engage online. In a school system already [segregated] by race and wealth, this disruption had the clear potential to deepen long standing inequalities.

As Chicago scrambled to build virtual classrooms, LEAP Innovations was uniquely positioned to understand the endless challenges many students, parents, and educators were experiencing. Since 2014, we've worked with more than 2,400 Chicago educators to build teaching practices that ignite the potential of every student.
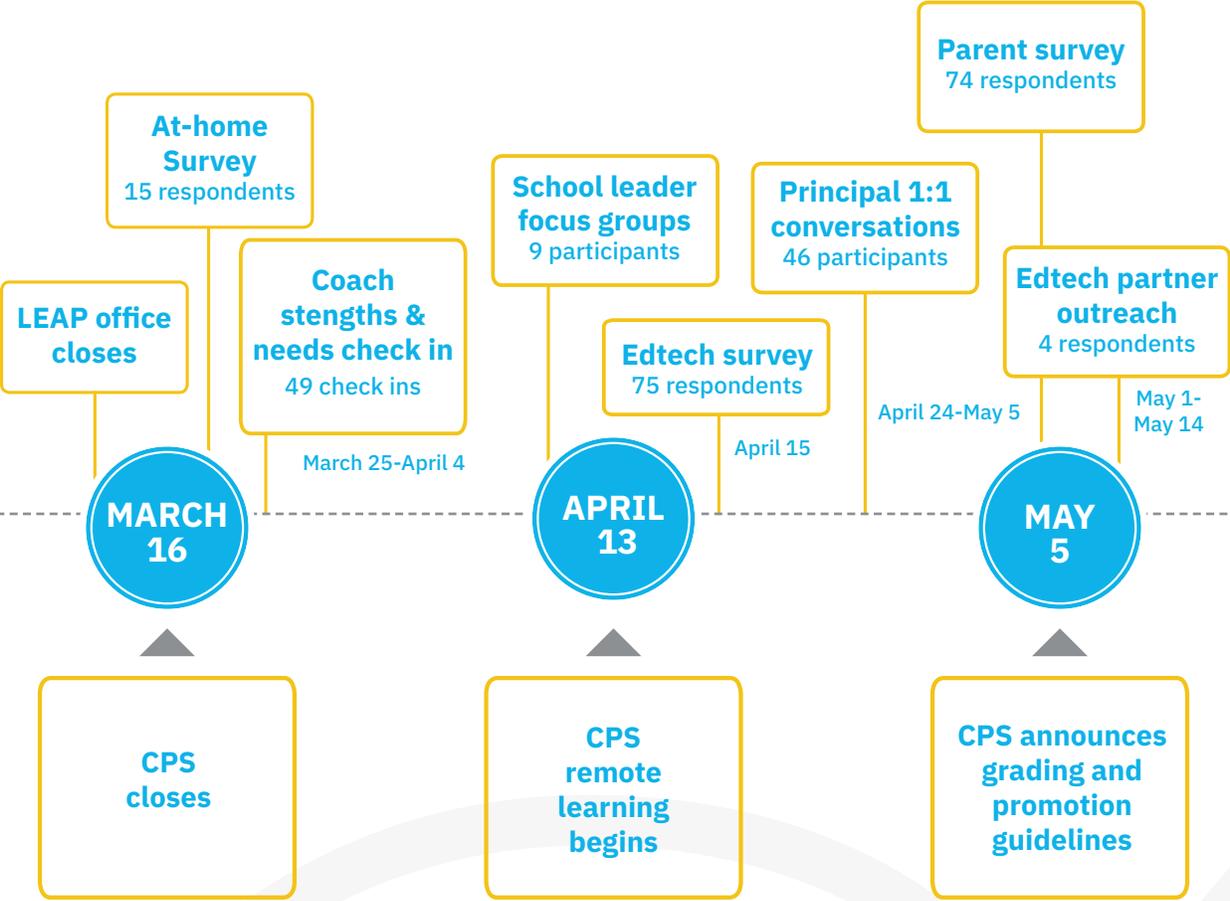
Our work has always been based on the fundamental premise that students learn better when they're empowered with the autonomy to direct their own path. In April of 2020, we found ourselves in the middle of the largest, fastest shift in schooling practices in history, scrambling to support a diverse cadre of educators, each with a different level of comfort in remote teaching, as they worked furiously to teach their students how to learn from home—and create the conditions for students to successfully drive their own learning.

As longtime champions of student-centered education, outside-the-classroom learning, and the thoughtful integration of technology, the educators we serve were well situated to navigate this shift. Our birds-eye view across many school teams, who had implemented these practices at varying levels, gave us insight into the challenges educators, parents, and students faced—and the strategies that worked.

Methodology

After Chicago Public Schools transitioned to remote learning, LEAP Innovations conducted a series of listening exercises with community members throughout our network. Over approximately **two months,** our research team collected insights from **74 parents, 98 educators, and 55 principals/school leaders.**

For the past six years, LEAP has partnered with an annual cohort of schools, which engage in a holistic change management and professional learning efforts to transform into personalized learning environments. All participants in the listening exercise are currently involved in LEAP's programming, either as an administrator overseeing the implementation of personalized learning, or a teacher participating in LEAP's professional learning services. As such, this exercise was not intended to produce scientific, representative, or generalizable conclusions about the overall shift to virtual learning in Chicago; it was intended to mine specific insights from those who have been at the forefront of the work, which may guide future efforts.

Parent survey
74 respondents

At-home Survey
15 respondents

School leader focus groups
9 participants

Principal 1:1 conversations
46 participants

Coach stengths & needs check in
49 check ins

LEAP office closes

Edtech survey
75 respondents

Edtech partner outreach
4 respondents

March 25-April 4

April 15

April 24-May 5

May 1-May 14

MARCH 16

APRIL 13

MAY 5

CPS closes

CPS remote learning begins

CPS announces grading and promotion guidelines

Where We Learned

1

While Chicago Public Schools had distributed thousands of devices and hotspots to students in need, a significant group of students in LEAP partner schools had not engaged in remote learning between April and May 2020.

- Across LEAP's partner schools, principals reported that an average of 13-15% of **students had not connected with their remote classrooms.**
- Teachers reported **86% of students had access to devices,** while roughly 80% had broadband at home.

2

Without the structure or accountability of an in-person classroom to guide students, parents began taking on the challenge of facilitating learning.

- Our parent survey found that **75% of parents followed their schools' online remote learning plans,** and 22% supplemented their child's education with free or paid programming.
- **12% of parents reported their students had not engaged with their teachers at all,** while only 33% reported 4 or more hours of engagement per week.
- **80% of parents reported spending one or more hours a day assisting their child with school work** and 87% reported being actively employed.

3

Teachers and principals reported struggling to engage with some parents, while parents themselves were concerned about the lasting impact of this disruption as well as their ability to facilitate meaningful learning for their children.

- **50% of parents reported being very concerned** that the pandemic would leave a negative impact on their child's education.
- **35% said they were not confident in homeschooling** their child.

4

School leaders said they were concerned about district and state responses to the crisis. They shared being worried that efforts to catch up students in Fall 2020 would lead to practices that harm rather than help.

- They cited concerns that a **focus on summative rather than formative assessment might reinforce struggles** while not providing accurate measures of where students are at and what kind of support they need.
- One school leader recommended that the focus in the Fall be in **ensuring students' emotional and social well-being,** addressing the trauma of the pandemic rather than defaulting to academic-focused solutions.

5

Teachers and school leaders said they leaned on one another for support but wanted more from their community.

- During our focus group sessions, principals advocated for forums that allow teachers to exchange ideas across schools.
- Teachers said they learned informally from one another but lacked access to wider networks to discuss their practice.

What's Working

While needs and strength varied across every school, classroom, and student, our team was able to identify insights about what strategies made the transition to virtual instruction more efficient and effective. Below are those strategies, along with concrete examples of how our partner educators put their plans into action.

STRATEGY: ACCESS

Students and teachers both need the basics: broadband and a connected device.

- An EdWeek Research Center survey reported that, by the end of May, only 4% of teachers had not connected with students at all, but only 50% were in contact with their students every day. United States Census [data](#) found that students were in live contact with their teachers for an average of eight hours per week.

- Census research also found that Black students were about 11 percentage points less likely to have a device available for educational purposes than their white peers.

- Every school's first focus needed to be getting devices and hotspots out to students in need. While distribution efforts were still in progress during the listening exercise, many of our partners sent students printed packets that they could use to practice their material at home, although this did not substitute for live instruction.

STRATEGY: CONFIDENCE

Approach teachers as learners, provide the support and guidance they need to make the shift

- Many teachers were overwhelmed by edtech options and 33% requested edtech integration support. Instead of pointing teachers towards masses of edtech products, schools found success working with teachers to pinpoint tools that meet their needs, offering technical support on those tools, and teaching their educators how to integrate those tools into their teaching practice.

Recognize that parents have varying ability to supervise students' remote learning and varying levels of personal fluency with technology.

- Census [research](#) showed that parents who had accessed higher levels of education themselves were devoting more time to helping school their children. A long history of research has shown how parents who had fewer educational opportunities growing up or are from non-majority cultures are made to feel out-of-place in their children's education.

- Educators worked to ensure parents know they are valued partners in their children's education. One network of charter schools responded by shifting the parent-teacher conferences planned for the spring to listening sessions to hear how they can best support parents and work around their schedule.

STRATEGY: ENGAGEMENT

Identify and engage with emotional challenges, like stress and uncertainty.

- EdWeek Research Center survey found that, by the end of May, nearly 75% of teachers still said that their students were less engaged online than they had been before the pandemic. Teachers are trying to reach students struggling with stress, fear, and boredom through a computer screen; it is daunting for many.

- Many schools prioritized social and emotional learning exercises with their students that give them a voice. Increased 'circle time' allowed students to share their feelings with their teachers and peers. They also were given assignments that allowed them to express themselves and document their experience, providing a vital outlet and valuable input for teachers to respond to students' needs.

Find ways to spark inspiration

- In some cases, teachers in subjects like physical education, drama, and the arts, provided daily activities spanning grade bands to keep students engaged in ways that were meaningful and relevant to their home life.

- Some teachers have created a 'challenge day' to support eager students' progress.

Teachers are learners, too, and need to be engaged as well

- Many principals and network leaders eased expectations on their teachers, recognizing that not everyone can transition their entire practice to a virtual environment overnight, and allowing them room to innovate. We have to meet teachers where they are, too.

- Some schools found success in creating educator communities, where educators can workshop issues and share solutions. Many administrations expressed a desire for additional social and emotional support for their staff.

STRATEGY: AGENCY

Find ways to transition personalization best practices, like learner pathways, goal-setting and choice menus, into the online setting

- Many teachers have leveraged edtech tools to allow students to choose activities that speak to their interests, explore passion areas, and create independent projects. Facilitating choice has helped with engagement.

- Teachers worked to give students even more visibility into their learning pathways, so they know what concepts they are trying to master, what comes next, and what they have to do in order to move on. Students who were used to progressing as they demonstrate competency were better prepared to make the shift to distance learning.

Conclusion

The April 2020 immediate shift to remote learning imposed by the coronavirus pandemic was jarring to all school communities. While reflective of a moment in time, the issues, insights and strategies unearthed by this listening exercise revealed themes of equity, digital readiness, engagement and teacher empowerment that are pervasive in all times. These insights will inform the work of LEAP Innovations to: **1) prepare and empower school teams for agility within the construct of remote learning and 2) to continue to evolve our work to transform the system into one where students thrive with rigorous instruction and education experiences, no matter where they learn.**