# Crisis Response in California School Districts
## Leadership, Partnership, and Community

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Public education today faces a troubling set of challenges, including declining enrollment, staffing shortages, and polarized communities, with school boards at the center of broader political debates. *How did we arrive at this current state?* This study—described here and, in more detail, in a related report—of seven California school districts conducted during the first 14 months of the COVID-19 pandemic explores how districts responded in real time to the unfolding health crisis as well as to the growing national reckoning about structural racism. Our case studies show that districts—often bolstered by relationships with labor, the community, and leadership—stepped up to a tremendous challenge, demonstrating resourcefulness, collaboration, and commitment to serving students and their communities. However, our findings suggest that challenges for district leaders have been relentless and show no signs of abating.

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![PACE — Policy Analysis for California Education]

# Introduction

Public education in 2022 faces a troubling set of challenges. Almost daily, media headlines draw attention to students struggling academically and emotionally from interrupted learning; high student absenteeism; declining enrollment; teacher and leader burnout; staffing shortages; leadership turnover; polarized communities; and school boards at the center of broader political debates over masks, vaccines, and teaching about racism. What has led our public schools in California to this current state of affairs? This brief summarizes the key findings from the full report, *Crisis Response in California School Districts: Leadership, Partnership, and Community*, which examines patterns across case study districts and highlights the ways in which particular relationships and conditions contributed to school districts' efforts to advance learning and support school stakeholders from March 2020 to May 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report also presents evidence that points to some origins of the troubling situation we are witnessing today.

# Methods

We conducted our study during the first 14 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, our research team set out to understand how seven California school districts responded in real time to the unfolding public health crisis. Our initial intent was to explore the ways in which local conditions and relationships with key stakeholders—community, labor, and leadership—shaped districts' ability to support students, families, and employees. As our work progressed, we began to explore not only the pandemic but also the growing national reckoning about race and structural racism. Later, as we analyzed the data alongside a rapidly changing pandemic and set of conditions in public schools nationwide, we realized our research had much to say about the challenges facing school systems in general during the 2021–22 school year.

From March 2020 to May 2021, we studied seven school districts selected to represent statewide variation in size, geographic location, urbanicity, and grade span. First, we sought out districts with a reputation for having strong relationships within the three main areas of focus: community, labor, and/or school board. We identified candidate districts via interviews with leaders from major associations that work with districts statewide as well as from media scans, then validated these recommendations by examining district websites and social media. We then tried to balance the final sample to include variation in the types of districts found across the state. The sample included two suburban, one large city, one midsize city, one small city, and two rural districts, located in the northern, central, central coast, and southern regions of the state. They varied from very small (fewer than 4,000 students) to large (between 40,000 and 100,000 students). With the exception of one high school district and one K–6 district, the remaining five case study districts were K–12 unified school districts.

Starting in March 2020, we began tracking the districts via the internet and social media, intentionally avoiding direct contact out of respect for the difficult work they were undertaking. During the summer of 2020, we conducted interviews with 13 state policy actors, including leaders from state agencies, advocacy organizations, labor unions, and the legislature. Starting in late fall of 2020, teams of two researchers conducted interviews via videoconferencing with district officials, union representatives, school board members, community members, and principals as well as parents and County Office of Education (COE) and public health administrators in some cases, for a total of 98 interviews and four focus groups. Throughout the process, teams analyzed district communications and plans negotiated between districts and their unions. Each team systematically analyzed all interview notes, documents, and other data and produced in-depth internal case study writeups. We then conducted cross-case analysis to identify common themes and variation across the sites.

## Key Findings

Our case studies show that districts, educators, and their partners stepped up to a tremendous challenge during the first year of the pandemic. We found numerous examples of resourcefulness among local leaders, and in some districts, relationships among key actors were strengthened as they unified around their pandemic response and shared priorities of serving the community. Our findings also suggest that challenges for district leaders have been relentless and show no signs of abating.

### Local districts responded to the pandemic in strikingly similar ways.

All the case study districts described a similar set of early priorities and actions, consistent with the ideas from Maslow's (1954)[1] hierarchy of needs motivation theory, the spirit of which was well captured by one central office administrator in explaining the approach to the early response:

> We really went through kind of the hierarchy of needs. You look at food and security and safety, and then it was really, "Oh my gosh, they don't have access to the basics of technology." ... And then, you move into the instructional model and shifting teachers into a virtual world and that becomes the next level.

Districts moved quickly to ensure physical safety by suspending in-person instruction, purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE), updating air filtration systems, and implementing safety measures. Meal distribution was an immediate priority for all districts, with many districts expanding their efforts over time to ensure families were secure for all three daily meals, over the weekends, and during vacations—and most districts provided these meals to all members of the family. Early in the pandemic, all seven districts similarly invested heavily in

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[1]  Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and personality.* Harper.

ensuring students had access to technology: purchasing and distributing laptops and hotspots, establishing technology support hotlines and resources, and in some cases, working with private partners to tackle the "digital divide." Every district interviewee cited prior technology investments and experience as critical to their ability to transition to online or hybrid instruction. Nevertheless, throughout the year many districts struggled with access and had not fully bridged the infrastructure gaps in lower versus higher income areas. Many developed asynchronous curricular materials and packets, making them available in print and/or online. Some included them in their new delivery systems, dropping them off with meals. All districts configured learning management systems with some farther along based on prior online learning programs.

Mental health of students, personnel, and families was a priority for all districts as the pandemic dragged on. A central office administrator reported experiencing "an overwhelming sense of sadness" from focus groups of students about their experiences with virtual learning, who said: "We don't like it, we want to go back"; students missed "friends in the playground." In all districts, dedicated staff tried to attend to the mental health needs of students and families with home visits and an array of services. As the pandemic progressed, district leaders commonly found themselves attending to the following three academic needs and supports: engaging students in online learning, adjusting grading and graduation policies, and targeting students with high needs.

## Response to the events following the murder of George Floyd and broader issues of racial injustice varied greatly.

During the early months of our data collection, as the pandemic was growing, the country witnessed widespread protests and attention to issues of racial injustice following the murder by police of George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In our sample overall, we observed more district-level actions taken in the urban and suburban districts in response to these events than were taken in the rural ones.

The urban and suburban sites in our study engaged in district-sponsored actions in support of Black students and families following Floyd's death, such as adopting resolutions condemning racial injustice, requiring cultural proficiency training, or organizing committees to examine systemic racism. One district organized new structures to give Black parents and students more opportunities to be heard. Although many districts took steps to respond to racial injustice, some interviewees questioned the depth of district efforts, remaining skeptical of their impact and regarding many of the responses as symbolic in nature (i.e., they were not likely to lead to substantive, structural, or lasting changes in behaviors).

In the rural districts, leaders told us that issues of racism did not exist or that individuals in their district were uncomfortable talking about these issues. One state leader explained: "Most [rural districts] are very White conservative and I've been telling the state, 'If you shove equity requirements down their throat, they won't get implemented well. … It needs to be really thought through.'"

**While the strain of the crisis and disruption could have pulled groups apart, the experiences of the seven case study districts during the first 14 months of the pandemic proved otherwise.**

When asked to reflect on the events of the past year and what they had learned, individuals across our case study districts consistently expressed precisely this point: Relationships matter in times of crisis. One school leader spoke about the value of investing in relationships during noncrisis times:

> *Relationships, relationships, relationships. Don't do permanent damage because of a short-term problem. You never know when you're going to be faced with a crisis, and you're going to need to ask someone to help you. If you invest in people, they will invest in you when you need them to.*

Our study showed that leaders and stakeholder groups came together in various ways during the pandemic crisis to help districts with the overwhelming set of challenges they faced.

**School boards listened to their communities and hung together.** Although school boards in five of our seven study districts delegated substantial decision-making authority to their superintendents early in the pandemic, board members' close community ties still proved invaluable in helping districts understand the needs and concerns of students and parents in their district and informing how best to respond to community requests. An administrator from one district noted: "[Board members] are elected officials in our local community. And so for them to have their fingers on the pulse is really important, that they're in touch with our needs as a school district."

Even though board members' personal politics often were divided—about when to reopen schools for in-person instruction or whether masks should be required of students and school personnel, for example—school boards in our case study districts, regardless of members' personal politics, maintained near unanimity when making COVID-19 decisions, at least during the early days of the pandemic. One superintendent explained: "[Board members] are politically very split in their own personal views, but very seldom does it come into any operations with the schools. They really do focus on kids." This comity would be tested when the pandemic assumed a more politicized cast.

Board members also played important roles in supporting antiracism efforts in some districts. This was particularly true in one district that responded symbolically and structurally with resolutions and new representative structures for Black students. Several respondents attributed these efforts to a recently elected board member of color as well as the recent shift from at-large to trustee elections, which gave communities of color more voice and representation on the board.

**Superintendents took a more personal approach.** Superintendents in our case study districts spoke of needing to adopt a somewhat different, often more personal approach to leadership in the face of the pandemic. One superintendent recounted:

*So I think being on the front lines leading by example [was] really important. I was out there filling our back-to-school lunch kits, providing the Chromebooks to students, providing meals to families. ... Being visible and knowing what [wa]s happening, continuing to know what [wa]s happening ... and not just assume [what was going on] or have someone else tell you, [wa]s really important.*

Superintendents spoke openly of the importance of the relationship with their school boards, that having a productive relationship furthered their ability to respond to the events of 2020–21. Communication was a critical component of successful superintendent–board relationships, as one superintendent explained: "It's about constant communication [with the board]. It's about pulling back the curtains and saying, 'Hey, this is what's going on.' It's about written communication, text communication, oral communication."

**Labor–management relationships in some districts bent a bit, but none broke; some even strengthened.** Labor–management relationships in all study districts—between districts and their teacher unions and between districts and unions representing classified employees— were tested by COVID-19. Two challenges—the politicization of COVID-19 and teacher and staff burnout and exhaustion—threatened labor–management relations and the stability of the teaching and classified-employee workforce.

However, the challenges presented by the pandemic neither derailed existing collaboration nor exacerbated prepandemic labor–management tensions. Indeed, meeting the challenges of COVID-19 seemed to contribute in two districts to improving labor–management relations. The most robust labor–management relationships were characterized by (a) open lines of communication between the district and union, (b) purposeful union engagement in critical district decisions, and (c) collaborative focus on student needs. These strong ties facilitated decision-making in the face of COVID-19. One district administrator said: "I think because we have trusting relationships, we can move quicker through some of these difficult decisions that we're making." Another noted: "I'm very grateful for the partnership because it allowed us to pivot quickly and make changes that other districts struggled with for a longer time period." Even in the districts with tense labor–management relations, the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 seemed to uncover fresh opportunities for more collaborative labor–management relationships.

**All districts made multiple efforts to communicate with and solicit input from community stakeholders; some leveraged partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) to expand supports for students and families.** Throughout the 14 months of study, districts became critical sources of information for parents, teachers, administrators, staff,

and students, devising a range of communication strategies. Some had a sophisticated public relations operation that shared information, promoted the district's response to the pandemic, and provided families with positive messages—often focused on the hard work of teachers and staff. In response to state requirements for stakeholder engagement in new Local Continuity and Attendance Plans, which temporarily replaced the Local Control and Accountability Plans, districts generally demonstrated similar approaches: surveys, advisory committees, and web postings of meetings with unions and parents. Less common approaches to community engagement included call centers, reopening committees, and site councils.

The pandemic also led some districts to leverage previously established partnerships with CBOs to provide or expand services for students and their families, such as reaching out to students not attending online learning or providing mental health supports via "teletherapy" and wellness centers. Recognizing the challenges of distance learning and the disconnect of some students, three case study districts partnered with local organizations, such as the YMCA, to establish centers (learning hubs) that provided on-site supervision for learning, particularly for students of essential workers. In collaboration with a district, one CBO opened on-site learning hubs serving about 10 percent of the district's students. Demonstrating a two-way partnership, the superintendent asked school educators to identify students disengaged from distance learning who would benefit from participation and invited the CBO to participate in planning conversations around district in-person learning.

In one district, the work of a long-standing parent organizing group helped communicate and support student and family needs throughout the pandemic. These partnerships provided direct support and outreach beyond what the district could do on its own. One representative of a community organization explained how these partnerships added value by assisting families in ways the school districts simply could not:

> We take care of the whole family, because we know that we can't just work with the kids. You have to work with the mom and the dad also ... we're a grassroots organization, feet to the ground, kind of at the heart of all of the stuff that goes on ... so we're probably closer to the pain.

**While grateful for funding, districts were frustrated with inconsistent guidance from the state.** State policies bounded the decisions and actions of local actors. In some cases, however, state guidance appeared to be inconsistent, which a central office administrator described:

> Are we saying we're now consistent with the county, are we consistent with the state, or do we listen to CDC? It's been the lack of clear guidance or change in guidance that has been very difficult as we're trying to then respond to our families in community.

Of course, many recognized the limited science around COVID-19 and were understanding of the state's difficulty navigating the uncertainty and rapidly changing crises. Perhaps most disputed was the state's decision to leave health-related decisions around closing and reopening schools to local leaders. Several interviewees argued that in such a crisis it was the state's responsibility to make such decisions. One school leader discussed the challenges of local control in times of crisis:

> [L]ocal control's great. Like if everything's hunky-dory … and everybody's doing their thing, and I want control of my little area because it makes more sense for me to have because this is where I'm at. [But] when there is an overwhelming crisis that is affecting everything, I think to usurp some of that local control and say, "For the greater good, we need to do x, y and z," would have given me and the people that I think I aligned with most closely here, a lot of great direction.

**Many districts came to appreciate their relationship with their county.** In contrast to the perceived shortfalls of the state's guidance, many administrators appreciated the role of their COE and/or county public health department. Leaders in all the case study districts expressed gratitude for their COE's immediate response to the pandemic, their communication efforts, and in some cases, their efforts to have all districts in the county close schools at the same time (giving cover to district leaders who could avoid criticism for closing too soon or too late). Many also praised the COE for coordinating the flow of information from health officials to the district and advocating on behalf of districts, and they were particularly grateful for communication brokered between districts and public health officials.

## Several conditions appeared to help build and sustain relationships during this time of crisis and disruption.

Looking across our case study districts and the various sets of stakeholders (labor, community, and district leadership), several conditions appeared to help build and sustain relationships during this time of crisis and disruption, including leadership, external funding and partners, and local context.

**Leadership practices.** Among all of these stakeholder groups, leaders played a pivotal role in building relationships. Several leadership practices stood out as noteworthy:

- *Proactive and consistent communication* was consistently mentioned not only as necessary for sharing information but also as an intentional, long-term relationship-building strategy—particularly for board–superintendent relationships.

- *Intentional and formal relationship-building* was another frequently mentioned leadership practice. In one case study district, the superintendent reported regularly bringing school board members into district trainings to purposefully build closer ties.

Other leaders reported the value of pairing leaders across organizations and working together on joint projects as ways to establish stronger ties.

- *Culturally responsive leadership* mattered greatly in a few districts, particularly for community–district and board–superintendent relations. In some cases, the leadership came from within the district, such as the board member who pushed to host a vaccine town hall in multiple languages and anticipated concerns from undocumented families.

- *Adaptation and learning from prior crises* appeared to inform and strengthen relationships and leaders' ability to respond to the pandemic. Although nothing could have adequately prepared leaders for the current crisis, a school leader in one district, when reflecting on their experience with recent wildfires, reported that having systems set up for substitutes and working asynchronously was helpful in preparing them for remote learning and responding to staff calling in sick during the pandemic.

- *Building relationships within the central office* was another deliberate practice said to assist leaders with pandemic response. In one district, administrators believed the horizontal management structures facilitated quick, informed action. Reflecting on the superintendent's pre-COVID-19 decision to create a more "flat" structure, one said: "I'm able to go to a meeting with the superintendent and the assistant superintendent and all the directors there and my voice is as valued as everybody else at that table. It really made a difference."

**External funding and partners.** Several of the strongest partnerships that emerged during the pandemic resulted from preexisting, long-standing investments of time and external resources. For example, one case study district that partnered with a community organization to offer learning hubs had received federal and state funding for extended-day programs with this organization for years prior to COVID-19, which helped cultivate this relationship. Overall, districts that had an organized infrastructure of community advocates and organizers, parents, and community members were particularly responsive to meeting the needs of children and their families.

**Local context.** Local politics strained relationships in several districts, particularly larger ones. The smaller districts with more homogeneous communities presented local contexts that seemed to have facilitated stronger relationships. In these smaller communities, individuals knew one another well, making it easier to collaborate in times of crisis. In addition to district size, another aspect of context pertained to prepandemic structural governance arrangements. In one district, the shift of school board elections from at-large to trustee area in recent years was said to have contributed to stronger community relations. One district leader explained: "Every community has a board trustee that represents that community's point of view. … I think that's very important. And they are in tune to their communities."

**Even the best of relationships could not overcome broader challenges outside of education policy—notably politicization and limited infrastructure.**

All districts faced insurmountable problems related to community polarization and politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic. School board members described receiving heated messages from constituents on opposite sides of the debate around, for example, when to reopen schools for in-person instruction. As some board members noted, the state had left each district largely responsible for many of the major COVID-19-related decisions, including the timing of reopening schools. Thus, different districts made different decisions. Board members also reported that local decisions were often compared to those of neighboring communities or private schools, some of which had reopened when theirs had not, thus increasing the pressure on them to side with those in the community who favored reopening schools.

This situation was especially challenging when faced with competing information from authorities and an ever more agitated community while trying to determine what the "right" decision was. One board member put it succinctly: "[COVID-19] really brought out the ugly in folks." And in the words of one superintendent, "I've been doing this [serving as a superintendent] for some time, but [this is] the most difficult political landscape to navigate."

Broader infrastructure limitations—in terms of technology and Wi-Fi, health and human services, and housing—further strained districts' ability to respond to the crisis. The infrastructure limitations were most severe in the lowest income areas of districts, those grappling with a legacy of racial and economic segregation. These broader social issues—with origins dating long before the pandemic—indicate that the challenges facing districts extended far beyond the school walls.

## Policy Implications

As we in California reflect on public education's pandemic era and monitor the daily deluge of crisis news, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that districts, schools, educators, and students are struggling, and their struggles appear to be growing, not abating.[2] At the district level, many school boards and superintendents find themselves in divided communities, searching for common ground with parents and other community members while confronting declining enrollments and the looming loss of funding.

What state policies might better support schools and their communities during this highly polarized time?

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[2] In an effort to gauge where these issues stood as of the time of writing our report, we included a series of postscripts throughout the technical report. For more details, please see the full report: edpolicyinca.org/publications/crisis-response-california-school-districts

- **Stabilize state funding for schools.**

- **Strategically invest in programs and policies** that address the key challenges and concerns highlighted throughout our report: teacher and staff shortages, leaders' and educators' mental health and well-being, students' social and emotional development, and racism and racial violence.

- **Recognize the limits of schools and make new investments in the social welfare needs of communities,** such as public and mental health services, food security, broadband access, affordable housing, employment opportunities, and the reduction of child poverty.

None of these suggestions will matter much if broad support for public education continues to erode. For that reason, we urge a renewed focus on building and strengthening that public support and, perhaps most important, helping districts and communities counter the steady drumbeat of disinformation about, for example, districts' social studies, history, mathematics, English, science, and social and emotional learning curricula. Specifically, the state should take the following actions:

- **Find ways to employ California's education policy focus of nearly a decade—local engagement and local control—to restore civil public discourse based on facts and verifiable information, and open the doors to a revitalized education system grounded in fairness, equity, and transparency.** The state could consider legislation to protect the civility of public meetings and promote local agreements around codes of conduct for meeting participants without limiting the right to dissent.

- **Enlist state associations that represent school boards, superintendents and other district officials, teachers and other certificated employees, classified staff, parents, advocates, and students to assist districts and their communities directly to counter disinformation campaigns focused at the local level.** This step will require some state-level organizations, at least temporarily, to redirect some of their organizational efforts by focusing time, energy, and resources more towards local districts and less towards Sacramento.

- **Direct state-sponsored agencies charged with supporting districts, such as COEs and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), to provide assistance to help districts devise tailored local strategies to advance civil community discourse and challenge disinformation.**

School districts need help addressing the legitimate dissatisfaction parents have with the last few years of pandemic education. Communities need help recognizing and confronting racial injustice. Both require countering disinformation campaigns that threaten the very fabric of education.

# Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

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**1**  bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;

**2**  making research evidence accessible; and

**3**  leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.

## Related Publications

Alonso, J. D., Marsh, J. A., & Daramola, E. J. (2021, August). *__Voter engagement and satisfaction with California's local school governance: Evidence from the 2021 PACE/USC Rossier poll__* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Hough, H., Marsh, J. A., Myung, J., Plank, D. N., & Polikoff, M. (2021, July). *__Californians and K–12 education amid COVID-19 recovery: Views from the 2021 PACE/USC Rossier poll__* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Humphrey, D. C., Koppich, J. E., Lavadenz, M., Marsh, J. A., O'Day, J., Plank, D. N., Stokes, L., & Hall, M. (2017, April). *__Paving the way to equity and coherence? The Local Control Funding Formula in year 3__* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Hurtt, A., Reed, S., Dykeman, K., & Luu, J. (2022, May). *__From policy to plans: Supporting students during COVID-19__* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education

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