

# Crisis Response in California School Districts

Leadership, Partnership, and Community

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## Executive Summary

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, polarized communities, and school boards at the center of broader political debates. *How did we arrive at this current state of affairs?*

Our study, conducted during the first 14 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, provides some answers to this question. In March 2020, our research team set out to understand how seven California school districts—varying in size, geographic location, urbanicity, and grade span—responded to the unfolding health crisis. In summary, 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 and strengthened relationships among local leaders. Although there may be a public narrative that the pandemic’s challenges for schools are lessening, our findings suggest that many of the troubles for district leaders have been relentless and show no signs of abating. The following are some of our key findings:

- Local districts responded to the pandemic in strikingly similar ways.
- Response to the events following the murder of George Floyd and broader issues of racial injustice varied greatly.
- Although 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.
- Relationships established prior to the pandemic helped but were not always necessary for the strong relationships observed during the 14-month period.
- Several conditions appeared to help build and sustain relationships during this time, including leadership, external funding and partners, and local context.
- Even the best of relationships could not overcome broader challenges outside of education policy.

To move forward, we recommend: (a) **stabilizing school funding and strategically investing in education-related programs and policies** that address key challenges, including teacher and staff shortages, leaders’ and educators’ mental health and well-being, students’ social and emotional development, and racial injustice; (b) **investing beyond schools to address the structural and social welfare needs of communities**, such as public and mental health services, food security, broadband access, and affordable housing; and (c) **supporting efforts to strengthen public support for public education** and counter the steady drumbeat of disinformation, calling on state and county agencies as well as state associations to focus time, energy, and resources locally. The ability of our communities and schools to weather the ongoing crisis as well as future crises depends on these investments.

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## Introduction

Public education today 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. At the time this report was written, the country was coming out of an unprecedented surge in transmission of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which was creating additional strains on school systems already dealing with teacher and staff shortages.

*How did we arrive at this current state of affairs?* Our study, conducted during the first 14 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, provides some answers to this question. In March 2020, our research team set out to understand how seven California school districts responded in real time to the unfolding health crisis. Our initial intent was to explore the ways in which local conditions and relationships with key stakeholders—community, labor, and leadership—shaped school districts’ ability to provide public education and support students, families, and employees. As our work progressed, we began to explore not only the challenges posed by COVID-19 but also the unfolding national reckoning with issues of racial injustice. 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 currently facing school systems in general.

As such, we have written a report that (a) highlights the ways in which particular relationships and conditions contributed to school districts’ efforts to advance learning and support school stakeholders between March 2020 and May 2021 by examining patterns across study districts and calling out cases where strong relationships assisted districts’ crisis response, and (b) presents evidence that points to some of the origins of the troubling state of affairs we are witnessing today.

### Study Background

The landscape of public education in California and beyond has changed dramatically since March 2020. With the onslaught of COVID-19 cases, communities and school systems throughout California have faced unimaginable consequences from this public health crisis. By mid-March 2020, most schools in the state had closed their doors. During the following months and subsequent academic year, school systems faced difficult choices about how to deliver instruction, how to ensure the health and well-being of adults and children, whether to reopen in person, and how to reckon with the equity implications of these decisions. System leaders were under tremendous pressure to make decisions quickly based on little and often conflicting information as well as lack of agreement within and across stakeholder groups, such as parents and teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic also coincided with other ongoing crises and world events. National media increasingly shone a light on systemic racial injustice, as evidenced by the murder by police of George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Local communities often demanded action and change from public institutions, including schools. The disproportionate health and economic effects of the pandemic on Black and Latinx communities—due to long-standing inequities in employment, housing, and health care—only heightened these calls for action (Fortuna et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2021). Many California districts had also experienced trauma from wildfires and the effects of climate change. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic is fundamentally different from prior crises because of its prolonged and continually changing nature, politicization, still-uncertain “end,” and education leaders’ lack of experience with or expertise handling anything approaching a global pandemic.

## Our Evolving Purpose

We initially designed this study to examine this complex set of events that began in early 2020. We asked: *How did local districts and communities respond to these events, and what helped or hindered their responses?*

At the outset, our research sought to provide an understanding of crisis response *in real time* (during the time of data collection). Based on theory and prior research, we predicted that districts with existing strong civic ties and local governance structures, including robust relationships among formal decision makers and with community stakeholders, would be better equipped to respond quickly, comprehensively, and equitably to these crises than districts and communities without these local conditions. As such, we systematically identified for this study seven districts that had reputations for and evidence of strong relationships with community members or organizations, labor associations, and/or school board members prior to the pandemic (see Appendix A: Methods for more details on our selection process).

Although these districts are not exemplars, per se, they are illustrative of districts that figured out ways to cope, to greater and lesser degrees, with the dual challenges of the pandemic and racial reckoning. We wanted to understand how these districts made critical decisions, what informed those decisions, and the decision-making roles played by labor, school boards, district leaders, and community stakeholders.

As our analysis progressed in 2021, we realized that many of the challenges experienced across the case study districts pointed to broader and enduring problems that we were witnessing in school systems across the country. Thus, we added a second focus to our analysis: *What can we learn from these districts about the broader crises and challenges facing public education? Were there signs of trouble early on?*

In the end, our study highlights cases where institutional and community relationships, some developed over a long period of time, contributed significantly to districts’ ability to make

organizational decisions of an unprecedented nature during a unique time. The research also illustrates a set of vexing challenges that even the most robust set of relationships could not overcome.

## Our Methods

From March 2020 to May 2021, we studied seven school districts selected to represent statewide variation in size, geographic location, urbanicity, and grade span (see Table 1). 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 state leaders (from major associations, those working with districts statewide) and 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 includes two suburban, one large city, one midsize city, one small city, and two rural districts, which are located in the northern, central, central coast, and southern regions of the state. The study districts vary 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 case study districts are K–12 unified school districts. In two of the districts, teachers are represented by the California Federation of Teachers (CFT). The California Teachers Association (CTA) is present in the remaining five districts.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Case Study Districts

Urbanicity	Region	Grade span	Enrollment 2020–21	Students eligible for FRPL (percent)	English learners (percent)	API, Native American, or Alaska Native students (percent)	Black students (percent)	Latinx students (percent)	White students (percent)
<b>Large city</b>	Central	K–12	40,000–100,000	>75	10–25	10–25	<10	50–75	<10
<b>Small city</b>	Central coast	K–12	10,000–40,000	50–75	25–50	<10	<10	>75	10–25
<b>Suburban</b>	South	K–12	10,000–40,000	50–75	10–25	25–50	<10	25–50	<10
<b>Suburban</b>	South	K–12	4,000–10,000	>75	10–25	<10	<10	>75	<10
<b>Midsize city</b>	Central coast	K–6	4,000–10,000	>75	50–75	<10	<10	>75	<10
<b>Rural/suburban</b>	North	9–12	4,000–10,000	10–25	<10	<10	<10	10–25	50–75
<b>Rural</b>	Central	K–12	<4,000	>75	50–75	<10	<10	>75	<10

Source: Education Data Partnership, ed-data.org, accessed February 3, 2022.

Note: We adjusted all figures to maintain district anonymity. FRPL = free or reduced-price lunch; API = Asian Pacific Islander.

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/ Zoom with district officials, union representatives, school board members, community members, principals, County Office of Education (COE) and public health administrators, and, in some cases, parents, for a total of 98 interviews and four focus groups (see Table A-1 in Appendix A). Throughout the process, teams analyzed district communications and plans, including Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs) and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) negotiated during the COVID-19 pandemic between districts and their unions. Each team systematically analyzed all interview notes, documents, and other data and produced in-depth internal case study write-ups. We then conducted cross-case analysis to identify common themes and variation across the sites.

In late 2021, during our analyses, we started to reflect on widely publicized problems facing public schools (e.g., problems related to student mental health, politicized school board meetings) and conducted additional internet-based research on each of our case study districts to see what had transpired in the months after the conclusion of our data collection. We stopped this research on February 7, 2022. These articles and stories, along with national media and research, form the basis of “Postscript” sections integrated throughout this report. Throughout the report we present challenges that surfaced in our districts during our initial data collection (March 2020 to May 2021), and, in the “Postscript” sections, we connect them to broader and enduring problems witnessed after data collection (June 2021 to February 2022) in our study districts and school systems nationally.

To protect anonymity, we do not name individuals and organizations throughout much of the report. We have named a few districts when spotlighting particularly promising examples.

The following section of the report describes the state policy response, followed by a short description of how districts responded to the events of 2020–21. We then take a deeper look at the relationships shaping responses and conclude with lessons and implications.



## Overview of Crisis Response

### State Policy Response (March 2020 to May 2021)

Throughout the pandemic, state policies established parameters for district action. Here we offer a summary of the major state-level policies based on publicly available documents. See Appendix B for a more detailed timeline and description.

**March to April 2020:** Although not mandating school closures, the governor issued a series of executive orders in early to mid-March 2020 to guide local response “in the event schools close as a result of COVID-19.” Through these orders, the governor guaranteed uninterrupted state funding for schools through the end of the 2020–21 school year based on (a) continued high-quality education delivered via distance learning or independent study, (b) provision of school meals to students, (c) supervision of students during regular school hours “to the extent practicable” (Exec. Order N-26-20, 2020), and (d) continuation of employee salaries and benefits as well as a freezing of layoffs. The state also suspended state standardized testing for the remainder of the year, extended the timeline for annual testing of English learners and special education students, and issued funds to school districts for the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) and/or supplies and labor necessary for cleaning schools. In April 2020, the state issued additional “do no harm” policies to ensure that remote instruction would not disadvantage students with limited access, including giving districts the option to replace letter grades with credit/no credit ratings. In early April, all major state education organizations signed a nonbinding “framework for labor–management collaboration” encouraging cooperation between labor and management around actions taken during the pandemic (California Department of Education, 2020a).

**Late spring and summer 2020:** The state determined that counties with an elevated level of spread of COVID-19, placed on a “Watch List” based on a set of benchmarks, were prohibited from reopening schools for in-person instruction. Soon after, a budget trailer bill reinstated requirements that were suspended when schools closed for in-person instruction and added new requirements for the 2020–21 school year. This policy required that, in addition to ensuring students had access to computers, connectivity, and supports, schools offer live student–teacher interaction with minimum daily instructional minutes. The bill also reinstated student work, grading, and attendance-taking requirements, and it required that districts track student engagement and that students with special needs receive necessary support services.

In preparation for the possible return to in-person instruction in the fall, the California Department of Education (CDE) released a guidebook based on input from a statewide task force on reopening schools (the guidelines were updated in May 2021). The state noted that its evolving guidance on reopening schools for in-person instruction would be shaped by advisories

from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). At this time, the state suspended Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and replaced them with Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs), which required information about how districts would address learning loss when in-person instruction resumed, including students' social-emotional needs, strategies for reconnecting with parents, and meal provision. In August, the governor replaced the county Watch List system with color-coded tiers and declared that schools in counties in the "purple tier"—indicating widespread infection—were prohibited from reopening for in-person instruction.

### Local Response to COVID-19: Cross-Case Patterns

At the local level, our data indicate consistency in the way districts responded to the pandemic. All the case study districts described a similar set of early priorities and actions, followed by a growing emphasis on mental health and academic learning supports as the pandemic dragged on.

**Early coping addressed the "hierarchy of needs."** When asked to describe their priorities early in the pandemic, one central office administrator captured a common mindset across our study districts:

*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.*

Building on ideas from Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs motivation theory, in all districts leaders worked tirelessly to ensure that students' basic needs were met: that they—and, in many cases, their families—were safe, had food, and were able to access learning in some way. What is striking is how consistently districts stepped up to purchase and distribute meals, hardware, means to access the internet, and learning materials and systems.

**Physical safety.** In mid-March 2020, COEs across the state helped facilitate school closures to ensure safety. During the early months of the pandemic, administrators in all districts purchased PPE and established safety protocols. Later in the year, many districts turned their attention to air-filtration systems, particularly when considering plans for a return to in-person instruction. As information and higher level guidelines changed, many leaders developed close partnerships with local public health officials—individuals not traditionally involved in district decision-making. Finally, several districts organized "town halls" to share health-related information with families.

Even as new evidence emerged about the virus and the efficacy of certain safety measures (e.g., sanitizing classrooms with solvents, plastic dividers), some leaders admitted that these measures were nonetheless valuable for assuaging fears. Commenting on potential overspending on hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies, one district administrator reported: “It is about perceptions and fear, not science.”

Nevertheless, limited health and safety infrastructure constrained districts’ ability to respond. Many local public health agencies were simply overwhelmed by the needs and their own capacity gaps. Educators in one district had access to COVID-19 testing for only 2 hours every other week. In another district, the county public health agency was understaffed, which meant that only a few district-employed nurses handled contact tracing. In still another, educators were challenged to access vaccinations, as there was no regional center in the area. Given that teachers’ willingness to come back to in-person instruction was closely linked to vaccinations, this broader structural limitation impeded the district’s reopening plans.

**Meals.** All districts immediately prioritized the distribution of meals to all families regardless of income. They set up locations around the district for easy, safe pickup (e.g., drive-through “grab and go” in school parking lots), and most added home delivery in recognition of the transportation constraints facing many families. One superintendent reported delivering meals himself and appreciating his interactions with the students. Many districts expanded their efforts over time to ensure families were secure for all three daily meals, over the weekends, and during vacations—and most provided these meals to all members of the family.

The need to provide meals in all seven districts suggests a failing of broader social services that relied on schools to compensate. Frustrated by the lack of local capacity to support families, one district administrator reported: “We fed all the adults in our city for, and on behalf of the city, like forever, because nobody else was doing that work.”

**Technology.** Early in the pandemic, all seven districts invested heavily in 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.” In one instance, the district not only paid for hotspots but also erected an antenna to reach the more isolated corners of the district. Another district deployed buses equipped with internet connections and worked to develop towers to expand internet access further. Efforts to advance equity through these technology investments were a source of great pride for many leaders. Over time, technology investments sometimes shifted to address emergent needs. Administrators in one district purchased more than 5,000 headsets for students after hearing that many were struggling with distractions at home while online. They “traded out” initial hotspots with higher quality new ones and purchased secondary devices for teachers to assist them with online instruction. They also allowed students to “rent” a desk or chair from the district to establish a place to connect and work online.

Notably, in virtually every district, interviewees cited prior technology investments and experience as critical to their ability to transition to online or hybrid instruction. “We’ve been a tech district for many years,” boasted one district leader. Several districts had prior “one-to-one” programs that provided students with laptops. Others had also trained teachers in how to integrate technology into their instruction. A few had virtual programs and/or digital curricular materials. Interviewees in one district repeatedly attributed their ability to pivot quickly to remote instruction to a preexisting virtual academy. One district leader said:

*[W]hen it came time for us to go to distance learning immediately, we had resources ... those instructors [of the virtual academy] got out and helped the rest of the district ... [the virtual academy] programs have been changing and developing over the last 2 to 3 years, to where they just have it perfected. It was a great resource for the rest of the district.*

Nevertheless, throughout the year many districts struggled with access and had not fully bridged the infrastructure gaps in lower versus higher income areas. Even well-resourced school systems could not overcome historical disinvestment in critical infrastructure like high-speed internet. Lack of broadband internet access proved to be particularly vexing for districts with families in rural areas. One district administrator explained the intractability of these infrastructure issues:

*Part of our issue here is even with pushing out hotspots and everything we could do, there’s a real lack of access to Wi-Fi because part of our community has very few cell towers. ... We’ve tried to bring support into the community. We tried to park a bus in a neighborhood as a pilot because we’d seen some other districts have done it. We’re willing to try anything.*

Other districts noted struggles with at-home learning environments: lack of adults at home to provide technical support and multiple individuals sharing unstable connections.

In fact, limited availability of affordable housing posed a related set of challenges for one district in particular. Interviewees reported that decades-long rising housing costs and high unemployment contributed to families leaving the area and frequent overcrowding that affected student engagement in online learning. Officials reported that internet companies would run only one connection to a house despite the fact that two or three families were often sharing the house. The overcrowded conditions also made it nearly impossible for students to have a reasonable place to do distance learning. The spread of the virus was reportedly hard to contain among families of farmworkers who could not afford to miss work even if they were sick.

**Learning materials and online systems.** Finally, districts worked hard early in spring 2020 to develop materials and systems that would allow students to learn at home. Many developed asynchronous curricular materials and packets, making them available in print and/or online. Some included these materials in their new delivery systems, dropping them off with meals. All districts configured learning management systems, with some further along based on prior online learning programs. Some districts centralized the learning format and content, creating a standard schedule for all schools and/or a common curriculum.

**Mental health of students, personnel, and families was a priority for all districts as the pandemic continued.** As schools have long been a lifeline for mental health supports, leaders had to step up to address the increased emotional needs of students and adults during the pandemic. In all districts, wellness centers and/or dedicated staff tried to attend to the mental health needs of students and families with home visits, services, and an array of professional staff. Some of these efforts predated COVID-19 but were expanded in its wake. Most districts had systems in place to monitor students or families in crisis and/or students not engaging in online learning. Leaders in one district developed a team of mental health professionals to deploy when a student or family needed support. The team also developed a tool for teachers to use every other day to assess the social-emotional well-being of students and carefully monitored chat and emails to identify students in distress. Staff at family resource centers in another district broadened supports for families to include assistance with funerals of family members and responses to housing eviction. Many districts also required or made available curriculum- and school-based activities addressing social-emotional learning during school hours.

As district administrators worked to build these supports, they consistently shared their deep concerns about students' well-being. Some recognized that problems of engagement and students' not logging on for online instruction likely stemmed from underlying emotional and mental health issues. A community health organization leader observed:

*There's clearly an increase in isolation, disconnection. ... The 2 days that they're not in school ... their sleep is off, their routine is off, they're falling behind and they're tired of trying. ... They're really struggling to keep up with the demands of school.*

A principal in this same district shared: "The reason why the social-emotional health of young people hasn't come to the halt is because it is so glaring, so front and center. ... It's what's on fire and you've got to put the fire out." In another district, 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." The conversations were "very social heavy," focused on students missing "friends in the playground."

An administrator in another district was particularly concerned about students who "had a 5150 [a psychiatric hold] the previous year, or who had some type of suicide risk assessment the previous year" and had prioritized outreach to those students. This same administrator reflected

that early on, “we were well aware that there was going to be more students and families reaching out, we just had been reading articles, and research, and seeing the increase of just depression and anxiety increasing.” A mental health professional in another district reported: “Those that just really thrive off of social interactions, I’ve seen a huge increase in suicidal ideations in general, and fleeting thoughts of wanting to hurt themselves.” This same individual expressed concerns about the effects of returning to in-person learning on students who found security in the online modality:

*Those with anxiety feel like they’re doing great because they’re not being forced to leave the house. They’re not being forced to engage in social interactions. Those are the ones I’m most concerned about when we go back to in-person learning, because they have had this false sense of security.*

Several districts also invested in mental health supports for adults. Leaders in one district recognized the value of supporting their principals in particular:

*It’s really important and no time more than this, that we take care of the people we work with, their social, emotional behavior, their needs, to listen and to communicate was the number-one priority. ... And when they feel supported, then they can easily support their teachers.*

In another district, leaders launched a social media campaign early in the pandemic to showcase images and statements of staff (and students) working to reduce the spread of the virus and to support “excellence” in online instruction. One district worked with the COE to guarantee that employees and their families had access to mental health supports, along with making counselors available to their staff and instituting mental health care Fridays.

**Ongoing academic efforts focused on engagement, grading/graduation, and students with high needs.** As the pandemic progressed and the months passed, district leaders commonly attended to several areas of academic need and support: (a) engaging students in online learning (getting them to show up and participate), (b) adjusting grading and graduation policies, and (c) targeting students with high needs.

**Student engagement.** Interviews in all districts uncovered deep concerns about students not attending class or disengaging from the online platforms. One administrator explained: “Students just do not feel engaged right now ... unfortunately, our historically underrepresented groups, our students in poverty are disproportionately struggling as a result of both distance learning and hybrid.” State budget requirements<sup>1</sup> regarding distance learning and attendance in

<sup>1</sup> See Education finance: Education omnibus trailer bill, Cal. Assemb. B. 77 (2019–2020), [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200AB77&firstNav=tracking](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB77&firstNav=tracking)

the fall seemed to encourage districts to enact more systematic practices. In one district, each school had an attendance task force to monitor students and reach out to those who were not logging in or were not engaged online. Members (including administrators, school counselors, and family support staff) met regularly to determine the cause of the disengagement and make a plan to contact the family and/or student.

One district superintendent attributed support from central office staff and targeted professional development as key to improving the delivery of distance learning and student engagement:

*On the distance learning side, man, I cannot be more proud. If you think back to March 16, to where we are now. If you were to, quote unquote walk into a classroom right now, I think that you would be floored in terms of classroom relationships, classroom structures and procedures, student engagement. You can visibly see the trajectory in the improvement. I'm going to attribute this growth ... [to] the professional learning that we have been able to do with our teachers.*

**Grading and graduation policies.** Consistent with state guidance, many districts developed new grading policies (California Department of Education, 2020b). Administrators in one district characterized the “no-harm grading policy,” which valued mastery, as more equitable than the traditional grading system. In another, both district and union leaders boasted of their quick efforts to revise grading policies in spring 2020 to address the learning challenges of online instruction and in winter 2020–21 to address the particular needs of secondary students. The spring effort stemmed from concerns about low teacher grades and obstacles facing students, as a central office administrator explained:

*What the progress report data revealed to us was that our teachers were grading our students extremely hard, and they may not have been as considerate of the conditions under which instruction was being provided and in [the] learning environment which students were being asked to perform.*

Other districts adjusted graduation requirements. In one district, leaders “rolled back” the requirements “as a safeguard to prevent high school dropouts.” An administrator explained:

*We're closer to the state minimums now than we've ever been. And we're not doing that to just water down the diploma, we're doing it because it's not fair. The students didn't choose the pandemic. ... And then knowing that it's your historically underrepresented groups in your students in poverty that are failing classes.*

Some may question these changes as lowering expectations instead of addressing the root cause.

**Support for students with high needs.** Realizing that some families were unable to support their children adequately with online instruction at home, four districts worked with community partners to set up “learning hubs” on campuses. At these centers, staff supervised socially distanced online instruction for children of first responders, youth experiencing homelessness and in foster care, and others. When reopening schools for in-person instruction, most districts prioritized “high needs” students to come back first. In one of these districts, students who were identified as the most vulnerable (youth in foster care and students who were experiencing homelessness or living in transitional housing or motels) were brought back to campuses in small cohorts for in-person instruction starting in fall 2020.<sup>2</sup>

Despite concerted efforts, we nonetheless heard lingering concerns about the learning needs of all students and of particular student groups: students with disabilities, migrant and immigrant students, and youth experiencing homelessness and in foster care. One superintendent stated: “Students with learning disabilities, students who are in perhaps the programs where we have a full day, special day class, I am concerned about those students.” A school leader echoed these sentiments, calling out “students in life skills”:

*Those students are limited. They might have nonverbal aspects to them. So, it’s hard for them to communicate when we’re on one-on-one, and now with the computer, it’s even harder just for them to participate and engage and see whether they’re learning or not.*

An administrator in another district worried about students with disabilities and English learners:

*Our students with disabilities, ... visually impaired [and disabilities categorized as severe], this particular format [online] does not translate well. ... Our students who are learning an additional language, even though we have a schedule, even though we’ve got this built-in time to make sure they get their designated ELD [English language development], this environment is not conducive to collaboration. ... [I]t’s not the same as being in the classroom and making friends, and being social, learning is social.*

**Postscript.** Following our data collection, it became clear that many of the early concerns and challenges surfaced in our seven case study districts—limited internet access, students struggling socially and emotionally from early isolation, limited engagement in academic learning online—have persisted, if not worsened.

<sup>2</sup> When the county moved into the purple tier, this was discontinued, but when the county moved back to the red tier in early spring, the district brought these groups back.



**Infrastructure.** Although state and federal funds have been made available to support districts and families with internet access and Assembly Bill 156 will support statewide expansion of broadband infrastructure, significant short-term needs remain. Research from spring 2021 paints a mixed picture of progress. A statewide survey indicates that although 91 percent of households have high-speed internet access, 16 percent of low-income families are not connected to the internet, and 10 percent depend on smartphones to gain access (Mackovich-Rodriguez, 2020). Other studies raise questions about the quality of internet access (i.e., speed and reliability), showing that in California, one in five households with K–12 students did not consistently have sufficient internet access for online school and that Black and Latinx students were 30–40 percent more likely than White students to report limited internet access (R. J. Smith, 2021; see also Ong, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

**Student mental health.** Consistent with early reports during our data collection, the social-emotional needs of students have become an even greater concern across our case study districts, the state, and the nation. In fall 2021, leading health professionals declared a national emergency in mental health for children and youth:

[A]cross the country we have witnessed dramatic increases in Emergency Department visits for all mental health emergencies including suspected suicide attempts. The pandemic has struck at the safety and stability of families. More than 140,000 children in the United States lost a primary and/or secondary caregiver, with youth of color disproportionately impacted. We are caring for young people with soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality that will have lasting impacts on them, their families, and their communities. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021)

The declaration also recognized the added effects of the pandemic on students who are Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), above what White people faced:

The inequities that result from structural racism have contributed to disproportionate impacts on children from communities of color. This worsening crisis in child and adolescent mental health is inextricably tied to the stress brought on by COVID-19 and the ongoing struggle for racial justice and represents an acceleration of trends observed prior to 2020. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021)

Similarly, in December 2021 the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory warning of a national youth mental health crisis. Noting the myriad problems facing students before the pandemic, the Surgeon General wrote: “The COVID-19 pandemic further altered their experiences at home, school, and in the community, and the effect on their mental health has been devastating” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021)—particularly for the most vulnerable youth (e.g., youth with disabilities, youth experiencing homelessness, and LGBTQ+ youth).

In recognition of these devastating problems in California, the governor signed Assembly Bill 309 into law in October,<sup>3</sup> which directs the CDE to develop a protocol for schools to use to identify and better address student mental health challenges. State and federal COVID-19 funds have also been directed to support student well-being.

In our case study districts, available data indicate ongoing mental health and discipline challenges. In January 2022, teachers in one of our districts questioned the push for a return to prepandemic curricular content and pacing in the face of worsening mental health of students “reeling from the collective trauma that we are all feeling.” Teachers have also commented on the weakened work habits of students compared to prepandemic in-person learning. Reflecting on their district and beyond, one teacher leader noted that student behaviors are “straining districts and teachers to the breaking point.” Similarly, in a public forum in late 2021, one of our case superintendents reported an increase in student behavioral issues, proclaiming: “Kids have forgotten how to do school.”

**Student learning.** Nationally and statewide, research shows that students suffered greatly from distance learning during the 2020–21 school year, translating to what many characterize as “learning loss” and “unfinished learning” (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Recognizing these problems, in July 2021 California lawmakers passed legislation (Assembly Bill 130) to ensure that districts prioritized in-person instruction for all students during the 2021–22 school year. The law revised the “independent study” program and made it the only option for families/students unwilling or unable to attend school in person—essentially prohibiting widespread synchronous distance learning during the 2021–22 school year. State and federal policymakers also allocated considerable funding to help mitigate these issues.

Nevertheless, districts continued to struggle with significant learning needs. Our case study districts were no exception. In one of our districts, an administrator noted that despite efforts to stem learning loss, students who were already behind in math prior to the pandemic had fallen even further behind, some as many as two grades.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District (not a case study district), problems with the independent study options led some families to pursue legal action, resulting in a court mandate to attend to the needs of students with disabilities in particular (Blume, 2021).

Some would argue that widespread dissatisfaction with prolonged distance learning during the 2020–21 school year helped lead to a rise in angry attacks on school boards—including a highly publicized recall election in San Francisco, conflicts over mask and vaccine mandates, and pushback on curriculum and teaching about racism—a topic we cover in more depth in the next section of the report.

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<sup>3</sup> See Pupil mental health: Model referral protocols, Cal. Assemb. B. 309 (2021–2022), [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202120220AB309](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB309)

## Local Response to Heightened Awareness to Racial Injustice: Cross-Case Patterns

During the early months of our data collection, simultaneously with the growing pandemic, the country witnessed widespread protests and attention to issues of racial injustice following the police murder of George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The murder, of course, was not an isolated event and followed many prior cases of police killings, including those of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and Breonna Taylor, to name some of the more well-publicized victims. In our interviews, we asked individuals about district responses to these events.

Response to the events responding to the murder of George Floyd and broader issues of racial injustice varied greatly. Overall, we observed more district-level actions taken in the urban and suburban districts in our sample than in the rural ones. Although urban and suburban sites more commonly took action, these responses were often symbolic rather than substantive.

**Rural districts.** In the rural districts, we were told either that issues of racism did not exist or that individuals were uncomfortable talking about them. Referring to national protests following the death of George Floyd, one interviewee said: “We’re a rural district out here. So, a lot of those things that we saw on TV just didn’t happen out here.” Some believed local politics and power imbalances contributed to discomfort with race-related conversations and a tendency to avoid or downplay the topic, as one school leader explained:

*The minority group here is so small, and the dominant group is so outspoken about what they believe. No one dare[s] stand up to it. So when I say there’s not a problem here, I’m saying there’s no one protesting. There’s no one disagreeing. There’s no violence. There’s no upheaval. But I think there’s this small group that’s suffering in silence because their needs aren’t being addressed. And they’re just afraid to speak up in this community where ... 86 percent are red Republican, Caucasian folks.*

Another school leader in this same district identified “biases and blind spots present within our district structure” inhibiting action. They said:

*There’s some ... unacknowledged white privilege that is systemic within our district makeup at the leadership levels that probably need[s] to be addressed before we can really wholeheartedly take proactive steps in regard to a district-unified effort on racial justice or any of the other protest issues that have arisen this summer and fall.*

A state leader working with districts statewide affirmed the sense that a slow response is needed in these communities:

*Equity, racial injustice is ... I think that takes a lot of time to discuss within your community. Most [rural districts] are very White conservative and I've been telling the state, if you shove equity requirements down their throat, that won't get implemented well. So let's sit down with the youth and help them train the community themselves because you go into a Tea Party type area or a super conservative area ... and say, there's a problem with Black Lives Matters and all these other things that's going to be. ... It needs to be really thought through.*

**Urban and suburban districts.** In contrast, some of the urban and suburban sites engaged in district-sponsored actions—although many were symbolic in nature (i.e., they were unlikely to lead to substantive, structural, lasting changes in behaviors). Two district school boards adopted resolutions supporting Black students and families after the George Floyd murder. One of these resolutions reported condemning racial injustice and requiring yearlong cultural proficiency training at each school site. In response to student demands around the lack of racial diversity in curricula, the other district's school board agreed to require greater inclusion of authors of color in English language arts courses. One central office administrator described the district's response as one of “partnering” with the students to find solutions:

*[S]o we've been partnering with them, the more you listen to them, and really hear, it's not really about books, in one sense, it's really about the students hav[ing] a desire to be able to, in the literature, in the curriculum, they want to see themselves represented. In school, they want to see themselves represented, they want to be able to have conversations, they want to be able to tackle these tough topics, and talk about race and ethnicity.*

The district also organized a new diversity committee to examine opportunities for professional development, curricula, and data analysis focused on systemic racism. Collectively, these district actions intended to move beyond the symbolic and establish lasting policy changes.

In response to student and alumni protests and demand (many of whom cited racist incidents dating back years), one district issued a Black Lives Matter resolution and organized new structures to facilitate Black parent and student representation and opportunities to gather. They established a Black family committee to give greater voice to parents and Black student unions in the high schools supported by a designated administrator and counselor along with outside training. The district also created a new school board committee dedicated to “diversity and equity and unity,” was considering the addition of an equity office at the central office level, and was continuing with a series of equity trainings emphasizing “cultural proficiency” for classified staff. A labor leader in this district said: “This is very important for all of us that Black lives do matter, and that we need to change things that are not going well for some students.” An administrator in this district similarly acknowledged the “silver lining” in the past year's struggles:

*Not having an equity board policy is not normal. The social unrest that happened in our districts, that was not normal. So, I'm glad that through this most difficult time, it's really been a way for us to reveal or unveil some of the work that we needed to do that require[s] us to go a little bit deeper. It's going to make us feel a little bit more uncomfortable.*

Several administrators in this district credited their strong relationships and prior equity work with assisting them with their response to the racial unrest. One said it helped “pave the way for a smoother transition into this crisis.” A school principal who helped bring some of the Black student and family concerns to the district reported being “very pleased with how the district handled it.”

Another district reported removing school resource officers from campuses and replacing them with school counselors just a few years prior. Advocates cited the police presence as contributing to racial injustice and perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline. A second district was deeply engaged in conversations but had not yet removed the officers. The issue was said to be “very contentious” among school board members and, according to one principal, spilled over into the classroom where a high school course preparing students to be emergency responders worked with the district’s administrative team overseeing equity to review the curriculum on how issues of policing were being taught. The principal noted:

*It's just everywhere this kind of debate that's happening as a larger society. It pops up in the classroom, and more so maybe this year since parents can see over their kids' shoulders and see how teachers are talking about some of these things.*

Several districts reported other equity efforts that appeared to predate 2020, such as equity workshops.

Nevertheless, some questioned the depth of district efforts and remained skeptical of their impact. One labor leader, for example, argued that it was one thing for the district to pass a resolution and another thing to take a hard look at their practices:

*We have battled the early childhood education department for years because they have been pretty blatant in the way that they treat our teachers, many of whom are second language learners and work in our preschools. ... I just let the district know, ... "I'm just going to call it out what it is, it's racism. And you're helping perpetuate it by keeping ... those administrators or allowing them to treat their teachers that way."*

A community leader in another district questioned the district’s commitment to its Black students, who experienced the lowest attendance rates relative to other students during remote instruction. Speaking about the district, one leader said: “They don’t know how to communicate with our African American parents. They don’t know how to get them involved.”

In summary, we found considerable variation in how districts responded to the murder of George Floyd and broader issues of racial injustice. 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. We were more likely to find district-sponsored action in the urban and suburban sites, yet many of these responses were symbolic in nature, such as issuing a resolution supporting Black students and families or creating a committee. In a few suburban and urban districts, actions were intended to move beyond the symbolic to include lasting policy and structural changes, such as revising curricula and creating new permanent venues ensuring that Black students and parents had opportunities to meet collectively and provide input into district decisions.

**Postscript.** In the months following our data collection, two districts in our study experienced pressures to reverse antiracism efforts. To those acknowledging the deep roots of “White privilege” and racism (school leaders cited above), or who advocated for a slower approach to change because of fear and discomfort among more conservative communities (the state leader cited above), these events were perhaps predictable. Many also see the connection between the debates over teaching about racism in schools and the heated debates that occurred over COVID-19-related school closures, as they both are rooted in questions over “whose voice really matters” (McMillan Cottom, 2022) and could be exploited for political purposes. (For further discussion see the “Postscript” subsections in the “District Leadership,” “Labor–Management Relationships,” and “Community–District Relationships” sections later in this report.)

In one of our urban districts that invested heavily in supporting Black students in the wake of the George Floyd murder, pushback emerged in highly publicized ways. A politician with connections to White supremacists was invited to a community meeting (sponsored by a local Republican club) to speak about public education. One local account cited a flyer for the event that read:

What are your kids learning? Join the non-partisan, no-cost, educational conversation on our children’s education. Critical Race Theory is being taught to our students without our consent and we must engage together for the future of our kids.

Despite public calls to cancel the meeting, the event occurred, and two district school board members attended. According to one of these board members, they were invited to present on critical race theory and their ethnic studies program. One local account of the event proclaimed: “Hate had arrived in [the local community] and the [school district].” Local city council members in another case study district voted to remove a racist symbol from its logo but not without protest from community members, including the local chapter of the Proud Boys.

In one case study district, struggles emerged around the employment of school resource officers. As students returned to school in the fall, an increase in violence on campus prompted one of our districts to bring back police officers, who had been removed in 2020, and add

counselors in their high schools. The decision was approved by nearly every school board member. The school board in another district voted unanimously to maintain police officers in schools despite long-standing opposition from stakeholder groups. A research report citing student support for officers on campus might have influenced this vote.

These events, of course, are not unique to our study districts. Groups of parents and citizens have sought to end the supposed teaching about critical race theory<sup>4</sup> and racism in many districts throughout the state, particularly in more conservative communities (Johnson, 2021; H. Smith, 2021). One report described these events nationally:

After a summer 2020 surge of protest-fueled antiracist energy across the nation and increase in K–12 education efforts to explore issues of race and racism in U.S. society (often at students’ request), pushback against a caricatured vision of “Critical Race Theory” (“CRT”) in K–12 public schools rose over the 2020–2021 school year. Propelled by common talking points, media attention, state legislation, and school board protests, school- and district-level conflicts increased and intensified over the year and into summer 2021 as critics sought to restrict or “ban” curriculum, lessons, professional development, and district equity and diversity efforts addressing a broad but often loosely defined set of ideas about race, racism, diversity, and inclusion. (Pollock et al., 2022, p. vi)

Characterizing it as a “conflict campaign” with the dual purposes of manufacturing conflict to advance political/partisan interests and exploiting real disagreements over how to teach about race and inclusion, researchers found that at least 894 districts enrolling 35 percent of students nationally have experienced anti-“CRT” efforts. Nationally, at least 14 state legislatures have passed laws or taken actions banning teaching about racism in classrooms, and many others are considering similar legislation (Schwartz, 2021).

Yet in California, the majority of parents statewide indicate they want schools to teach about racism. In a May 2021 survey of registered voters, 72 percent of parents believed that schools should spend more time “teaching grade-appropriate lessons about the causes and consequences of racism and inequality” (Hough et al., 2021). Moreover, California has emerged as a national leader in advocating that students learn about the history and struggles of its diverse population, including issues of racism. In March 2021, the California State Board of Education passed a voluntary model ethnic studies curriculum, the first in the nation (California Department of Education, 2021). In October 2021, the governor signed into law a requirement that all students

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<sup>4</sup> Critical race theory began in legal studies and encompasses a set of theoretical insights aimed at understanding how U.S. structures and policies have created and upheld the subordination of racially minoritized people. For more information, see Bell, D. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma*. *Harvard Law Review*, 94(3), 518–533; Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New Press; Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (1993). *Critical race theory: An annotated bibliography*. *Virginia Law Review*, 461–516; Tate, W. F., IV (1997). *Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications*. *Review of research in education*, 22(1), 195–247.

complete an ethnic studies course to graduate (high schools must offer the course by 2025–26, and the graduation mandate takes effect in 2029–30), also a first in the U.S. (Fensterwald, 2021). Given the broader cultural wars being waged throughout the country around issues of race and curriculum, it is not surprising that resistance to such efforts remain (Nguyen, 2021).

With this basic understanding of how our case study districts responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and their heightened attention to racial injustice, including the challenges they faced and the lasting impact, we turn now to the conditions shaping these responses. How did key stakeholder relationships affect district actions?

## Conditions Shaping Local Crisis Response: Relationships With Key Stakeholder Groups

As we followed our case study districts through this first year and a half of the COVID-19 pandemic, we explored how administrators made decisions and the roles played by school board members, central office administrators, labor leaders, community stakeholders, and other critical government agencies. We found cases where relationships with key stakeholders, some developed over a long period of time, contributed significantly to districts' ability to make organizational decisions during this unique time. In fact, when asked to reflect on the events of the past year and what they had learned, individuals across our case study districts consistently expressed this exact 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.*

A central office administrator in another district noted the importance of strong relationships when addressing crises that engage topics that may be "uncomfortable," such as racial violence and racism:

*The social unrest that happens in our districts, that was not normal. ... It's going to make us feel a little bit more uncomfortable. And that's where all of these partnerships and relationships come into play, because now you've built that trust and that foundation during good times, and that will allow you to propel and excel during difficult times.*



Yet our analysis also revealed a set of enduring challenges that even the most robust set of relationships could not overcome, including educator and leader exhaustion, politicization of the virus, and community polarization. As described in the Postscripts that follow each section, these challenges laid the foundation for many of the ongoing troubles facing schools today.

In the following sections, we examine the roles of (a) school board members and superintendents, (b) labor associations, (c) community stakeholders, and (d) other levels of government. We organize each section with a description of the patterns in relationships observed across our cases, highlighting particular cases where relevant, followed by an examination of pervasive challenges and ties to more recent events.

### **District Leadership: School Boards and Superintendents**

Under normal circumstances, local school boards—the elected representatives of the communities they serve—assume a number of roles, chief among them hiring a superintendent, setting fiscal priorities and approving district budgets, and advocating for students, parents, and the community. The superintendent, directly accountable to the school board, serves as chief executive officer of the district and is responsible for implementing and administering the board’s vision and policies, managing the district, and making day-to-day operational decisions. In the best of times, school boards and superintendents serve multiple constituencies and interest groups, navigating competing agendas and pressures. The COVID-19 pandemic, neither “normal” nor the best of times, heightened the natural complexity of these roles. School boards and superintendents were tasked with making decisions, often quickly, in uncharted territory during a public health crisis. Study districts took several actions as they tried to deal with the impact of the pandemic. Some of these actions were predictable, others less so.

This section first examines how school boards reacted to the pandemic. Then it explores the role of superintendents. We then ask: *How did the relationship between school boards and superintendents affect districts’ responses?* We conclude by examining common challenges faced by leaders and presenting in a postscript an analysis of more recent events related to these challenges.

**School boards react and respond.** In most of our study districts, school boards played strikingly similar roles: delegating considerable authority to the superintendents, connecting with communities, and maintaining unity around COVID-related decisions.

**Delegating authority to the superintendent.** School boards in five of our seven study districts delegated substantial decision-making authority to their superintendents, particularly during the early days of the pandemic. The public health crisis occasioned by COVID-19 did not allow for school boards’ usual processes of deliberation, public comment, review, and discussion. Mandates changed frequently. Decision makers had to absorb shifting information coming from multiple sources, including the CDC, state entities like the CDE and the CDPH, and local health

authorities. Decisions needed to be made quickly as the public health crisis mushroomed. In the interest of the health and safety of students and district staff, boards chose to cede authority to district superintendents and let them take the lead in crisis response and management. This decision served as both an acknowledgment that a crisis required an other-than-usual response and trust in the chief executive officer to make good decisions during an emergency. One board member said:

*The Board has given the authority to the superintendent to take the action, any action he needs, so we [didn't] have to hold special meetings for it, which I think was very important, because we have faith in our superintendent.*

A board member in another district likened the situation to being at war:

*I think from a very practical standpoint, when [you're] in a crisis, you need to be able to move quickly. ... Your wartime general [the superintendent] needs to be able to give orders on the battlefield. You cannot keep checking with the President [the school board] every time. Your wartime general has to keep moving and make those decisions, so I think that's how [and why] we deputized the superintendent.*

School boards that yielded authority to their superintendents were also clear that these “emergency decision-making protocols” would be temporary. They were. Once discussions and decisions turned from closing schools for in-person instruction to when and how to bring students back into the classroom, school boards, while continuing to rely on recommendations developed by the superintendent, resumed their more conventional role of being responsible for the decisions that came forth. One board member told us:

*We would have to formally adopt the superintendent's recommendation to go back to in-person learning. [But] I feel like because that's such a big decision, ... we should be accountable by having to take a vote. Now I say that as coming from what my moral compass is telling me.*

**Understanding community needs.** Because school board members come from their communities, they feel an obligation to understand the community's needs and be responsive to them, insofar as they can during an unpredictable public health crisis. Many board members in study districts had deep and long-standing ties to the communities they represent and were active in a wide variety of community organizations, such as Rotary, Kiwanis, and other local groups. These close community ties were invaluable, said board members, in helping them understand the needs and concerns of students and parents in their districts and consider how to respond to their constituents' 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 in the earliest days of the pandemic when school boards had delegated the authority to make crucial decisions to superintendents, board members remained acutely aware that, as elected community leaders, they needed both to keep themselves apprised of how the pandemic was playing out in their community and to ensure some level of public engagement, even around decisions that might have been foregone conclusions. One board member described their district's approach:

*In March [2020], I think it was the first weekend in March, we had the first case [of COVID-19] in [the] county, and the next weekend, we were having an emergency board session, and we already [had] decided to shut down the schools. The president called [the emergency meeting] to have a public discussion about it. It wasn't that the superintendent or district staff weren't already working towards that; they were. But we felt it was important to have a way for the community to interact with the board and the district [around school closings].*

The importance of board members staying in touch with members of the community was magnified in districts in small, close-knit communities in which the school board often became the direct conduit when issues arose, as one superintendent explained:

*Everybody knows everybody. ... Everybody knows the board members. They are neighbors of the board members. So, if they feel that something's happened that they don't understand or that is wrong, they will talk to a board member in many cases before they'll talk to their principal or ... anyone else.*

In addition, board members were often current or former parents whose children attended schools in the district they now represented as elected officials. Especially if they currently had children in schools, those parents/board members had front-row seats to the impact of the decisions that their districts were making about pandemic learning. One board member whose child was receiving special education services observed the impact of school closures on her family and described how her experience as a parent influenced her decision-making priorities:

*There's two people on the board that are parents. So we could completely sympathize with what other parents were feeling. So, especially our [special education] kids, they took the biggest hit of anybody. Because when you talk about [special education] programs, we're not just talking about kids that have a hard time learning, and my [child] is one of those kids, by the way. ... And that's another reason why I can fight like I fight, and I understand.*

Board members sometimes took it upon themselves to try to solve some pandemic-related problems districts were facing, recognizing that district administrators were often overwhelmed with the constant pivots needed to respond to COVID-19. A board member in one district, for example, described calling internet service providers and pretending to be a parent who needed internet access. This board member was gathering information to develop a user guide for parents. In particular, the board member anticipated parents' questions about the documentation required to secure service, a particular concern among undocumented parents in that district.

In another district, board members recognized that some community members held historical mistrust of public agencies, so they helped create opportunities for parents to hear directly from and interact with community leaders and experts regarding the science of COVID-19 and the health care response. A board member in this district explained:

*One of the things that we did was we, as a district, had a vaccine town hall, and it was translated into Spanish and Mixteco Bajo, which is one of the dialects many of our farmworkers use. [We were] trying to get accurate information [to the community].*

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 and the recent shift from at-large to trustee elections that provided communities of color more voice and representation on the board. In other districts, the establishment of antiracism resolutions and committees originated with school board members.

Yet not all board members were seen as understanding community needs and leading the charge in fighting racial injustice. In one district, a central office administrator doubted board members' commitment to students and their demands for change. In response, they hired external consultants to elevate the voices of students and the community to create pressure for change. One administrator reported hiring this group to help "students become agitators in the system to change policy, to break some of the inequities that adults develop. It was really honestly ... my way of figuring out a way to push the board out of their slump."

**Maintaining unity around COVID-19 decisions.** School board members come from all walks of life. They have different backgrounds, different interests, and, of course, different beliefs. Board members in our case study districts also often held quite diverse political views that translated into different views about COVID-19. On a single board there might be members who saw COVID-19 as a severe threat to public health and safety, others who saw the virus as no worse than the common flu, and still others whose views fell somewhere in between.

Even though board members' personal politics were often 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 at least during the early days of the pandemic when making decisions. 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. They see other states, even other countries more “open” and so they’re thinking, “Are we buying into the political narrative or are we really doing what we should be doing for our students?”*

As this quotation indicates, boards were careful to think about the students their districts were serving. What made sense for them given the circumstances of the pandemic? As another superintendent noted, fraught decisions notwithstanding, “the board hung together.” That being said, school boards often found themselves struggling as responses to the pandemic took on an increasingly political tone.

We turn now to superintendents' roles and challenges.

**Superintendents and COVID-19.** The pandemic required superintendents to take on new roles and responsibilities. In the “Local Response to COVID-19” section of this report, we detail districts' efforts to put necessary health and safety measures in place, provide meals to students and often their families, implement new technologies and online teaching and learning systems, and attend to other matters like students' mental health issues and home circumstances, which made the education conditions and probable outcomes of the pandemic even more dire. All of these new responsibilities now fell into superintendents' professional baskets.

Superintendents in our case study districts spoke of needing to adopt a somewhat different and 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. I think that that matter[ed]. ... Being visible and knowing what [was] happening, continuing to know what [was] happening within the system and not just assume [what was going on] or have someone else tell you, [was] really important.*

Another superintendent described one of his key pandemic leadership roles simply as “being able to listen to the needs of the community, the needs of the students, the needs of the parents.”

**Networks of relationships.** Superintendents spoke of the importance of their networks of relationships as they tried to navigate the unique challenges of COVID-19. These relationships, they said, enabled them to build foundations of trust that made working through the hard times possible. One superintendent said:

*Well, number one, it's been the relationship that we have that's multidimensional. So relationships with the board, relationships with the community and the parents, relationships with our staff. And so I think that's number one. ... And then once you have ... that bedrock, then it's about having open and honest conversations and communication and collaboration in terms of what is the best approach here.*

Another superintendent described how the district used prepandemic relationships and structures to develop an approach to moving from strict remote learning to a system that combined remote and in-person instruction:

*Our approach to change, it's never been top down. When we moved to hybrid, we basically started calling our groups together of instructional leaders from each one of the campuses and we started saying, "Okay, from your perspective, what do you need to be successful? How can we help? What does this look like? Let's think through this together." And so between administration and teachers, we developed a common plan and we started to share that common plan, ask for feedback on that common plan.*

Superintendents acknowledged, as school board members had, that decisions around COVID-19 were often contentious and that pleasing everyone was something of a lost cause: "To say that everybody loves the approach that we are taking would be incorrect."

**Relationships between school boards and superintendents.** The relationship between superintendents and their school boards is crucial. The extent to which boards and superintendents have solid working relationships often predicts whether a district can function smoothly or is likely to be faced with serial disruptions. These relationships were tested, as was much else, during the period of our study.

Superintendents spoke openly of the importance of their relationship with their school boards: Having a productive relationship furthered their ability to respond to the events of 2020–21. In some districts, superintendents worked closely with board members to craft responses to heightened awareness of racial injustice. One superintendent characterized their Black Lives Matter resolution as one jointly developed with the school board, which pushed the superintendent to see "we need to change things that we're doing in the district, especially for our African American students." These symbolic efforts then pushed central office leaders to work together to establish deeper structural changes (e.g., curricular adjustments).

Superintendents also saw board relationships as essential for tackling the challenges of the pandemic. Respondents in one district noted that the crisis created by the pandemic actually led to an improved board–superintendent relationship. An administrator from that district commented: “Our board and superintendent have a good working relationship. The superintendent has the support of the board and ... that has actually strengthened [during the pandemic].”

Superintendents recognized that the enhanced authority granted to them by their school boards early in the pandemic created heightened responsibility, not just to manage the district during the crisis but also to ensure that the local governing authority, the school board, was kept well apprised of district actions and activities. Superintendents needed, they said, to determine the right balance between recognizing their broadened pandemic authority and ensuring elected leadership was not caught off guard.

Towards that end, superintendents told us, they strove to communicate effectively with their boards, making actions transparent and clear so that board members could answer to their communities. One superintendent described it this way:

*As long as [board members] can have a role ... or feel like they do, they’ve been very supportive, but they really need to be communicated with constantly because they’re getting so much from all their communities and they just want to know how to respond. They want to know what’s new every day and how we’re responding to whatever the news is every day.*

Another superintendent commented:

*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.*

And another superintendent said:

*I would just say, you cannot overcommunicate. So you cannot have too many ways in which you’re telling people sometimes the exact same information, but multiple ways because people just aren’t ready sometimes to hear the message. And so I would just say, “Communicate, communicate.” Try to stay aligned ... to do what is best for children ... [to] find a common ground.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> The theme of finding common ground recurs both in the case of relationships between school boards and superintendents and between district and union leaders.

Board members understood that part of their obligation was to communicate to the public about the COVID-19 decisions the district made. They relied on the information they received from the superintendent. One board member noted: “I really want to make sure that, in terms of communication and responsibility, that we [as board members] understand internally [what’s going on], and then figure out ways to communicate that over time to the public.”

Superintendents expressed frustration yet also understanding that—although they were dancing as fast as they could, responding to new information about COVID-19 and to their boards (and often directly to their communities)—time and circumstances were rarely on their side. School boards remained largely supportive as one superintendent told us:

*There’s always an urgency. We can never move fast enough. We can never plan well enough. The board gets so much pressure from their communities but they, I think, realize that the staff, as led by the superintendent, [are] doing everything we can within the environment and the constraints we’re working in.*

**Challenges.** Across case study districts, the politicization of the virus and related political pressures presented significant challenges to school board members and superintendents.

**COVID-19 becomes politicized.** As responses to the COVID-19 pandemic became increasingly polarized, school board members and superintendents were challenged to navigate political tensions and divisions. They reported great angst trying to figure out how to respond to divided communities where divisions were often ideological.

Board members fretted about the challenges of being pulled in multiple directions. No decision satisfied everyone. They described receiving heated messages from constituents on opposite sides of the debate about, 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 schools reopening. 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 their schools had not, thus increasing the pressure on them to side with those in the community who favored reopening schools and classrooms.

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. As one board member succinctly put it, “[COVID-19] really brought out the ugly in folks.”



A board member in another district said the tense situation, especially around schools reopening for in-person instruction, brought home even more keenly the elected status of board members and observed: “The community doesn’t elect the superintendent. The community elects [the] trustees. ... We’re probably going to take a lot of heat for reopening at any time.”

**COVID-19 politics and the superintendency.** Just as the politicization of COVID-19 created added pressures for school boards, so too did the increasing political tension around the pandemic affect superintendents as they faced parental discontent and community discord. One superintendent observed:

*The biggest challenge is ... the politicization of a virus and the political climate that we’re in because it’s really led to clear lines of demarcation. One line that we can never come back ... in person until there’s a vaccine and it’s 100 percent safe. And the other side is this is likely a planned pandemic; it is nothing but an instrument to remove a sitting president and make him look bad. ... And that has been the most complex environment. I’ve been doing this [serving as a superintendent] for some time, but [this is] the most difficult political landscape to navigate.*

Another superintendent described how there seemed to be no good decisions to make. The gaps between different parents’ understanding of COVID-19 or beliefs about it and the ways in which they thought the district should respond were just too great:

*So within your community now, you have the group that is frustrated that you’re not moving rapidly to open school like normal and you also have the other side. There are frustrated parents who are extremely unhappy because their students aren’t doing well. [Parents] are not happy with online, they’re not happy with hybrid, they’re scared of full-time. There’s a lot of angst and fear in the environment. ... Tensions during this time are unequal ... in my career.*

One superintendent noted that “COVID fatigue” and different narratives that developed as the pandemic stretched on contributed to community divisions: “So now you have both sides of the story, depending on the data that you want to listen to and read and believe. I think that has added to that polarization.”

Superintendents spoke of needing to take tough decisions around COVID-19, knowing there would be consequences for them. One superintendent said: “I have to be willing to get my head publicly caved in to a degree that [I] would not have previously anticipated.”

**Postscript.** Many of the challenges that surfaced in our early research—the politicization of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning as well as the pressure district leaders felt to navigate tensions among stakeholders—continue today.

**Ongoing politicization around COVID-19 and the racial reckoning.** As mask and vaccine mandates remain in flux and the science of COVID-19 evolves, school board members and superintendents continue to face community dissatisfaction and anger that schools are not back to “normal.” The situation reached something of a fever pitch in September 2021, prompting the California School Boards Association to send a letter to Governor Newsom stating: “Board members have been accosted, verbally abused, physically assaulted, and subjected to death threats against themselves and their family members” (California School Boards Association, n.d.). Superintendents, too, have found themselves threatened. In many districts, the vitriol aimed at public officials has been intensified by new demands for change tied to racial reckoning, both from those who think it is long overdue and from those who believe any discussion of the topic is a threat to their way of life (Feuer, 2021). (See the “Community–District Relationships” section of this report for a broader discussion of this topic.)

At the national level, the National School Boards Association wrote directly to President Biden to appeal for help in dealing with the threats and intimidation that some of its members faced (Shammas, 2021). In response, the U.S. Attorney General sent a memorandum to the Federal Bureau of Investigation requiring them to work with local leaders to address what he called “a disturbing spike in harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence” against school educators and board members based on their views (Bella & Barrett, 2021; Garland, 2021).

**Threats and fear lead to resignations.** As a result of the constant stress created by communities (or, more accurately, segments of communities) unhappy with district decisions related to COVID-19 and follow-on issues related to racial reckoning, superintendents are leaving their jobs at an alarming rate. Retirements and resignations are at an all-time high (Morton & Valley, 2022). Reports of superintendents’ duress have been so concerning that the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has launched a support network for superintendents (AASA, 2021).

## **Labor–Management Relationships and Districts’ Responses to COVID-19**

The relationship between case study districts and the unions representing educators was a key aspect of districts’ responses to the pandemic. Both formal negotiated agreements and informal labor–management conversations, often shaped by the nature of relationships between labor and management, helped to define how school districts approached the education challenges of the pandemic. This section considers first the relationships between districts and their teacher unions. A subsection then takes up an issue less often probed—namely, district-classified employee labor–management relations.

## Early COVID-19 Labor–Management Agreements

When schools closed for in-person instruction in March 2020, study districts and unions were obligated to develop new rules and regulations around work challenges created by COVID-19. Early agreements—the first negotiated in March/April for what remained of the spring semester and the second developed in summer/fall 2020 in anticipation of the 2020–21 school year—typically took the form of MOUs: short-term, temporary contract modifications prompted by exigencies created by the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> These agreements centered principally on health and safety issues and expectations for teaching during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

**Health and safety:** Protecting health and safety was a top priority as labor and management tried to balance staff safety concerns and student-learning needs. One union leader noted: “We’re just trying to keep everybody safe. We ... want to make sure that there are specific guidelines and rules that everybody follow[s].” These included regulations around PPE, handwashing, cleaning protocols, ventilation systems, physical distancing, and protocols to be implemented should a student or staff member fall ill.

**Pandemic teaching:** MOUs developed in spring 2020 focused on what remote teaching would look like, generally committing teachers to maintaining communication with students and their families and providing learning opportunities to meet diverse student needs. Although districts and unions negotiated district-specific guidelines, agreements were substantially influenced by state policies that framed what could be expected of students for the remainder of the spring semester. (See the “State Policy Response” section of this report for an explanation of relevant “do no harm” policies.)

MOUs developed in late summer 2020 shaped the coming 2020–21 school year, including specifics on instructional time (particularly synchronous and asynchronous teaching), standards for hybrid instruction, and plans for returning to full in-person instruction. These agreements marked a return to more of the requirements of traditional school made possible when the state reversed temporary spring policies and reinstated requirements for student work, grading, and attendance taking.

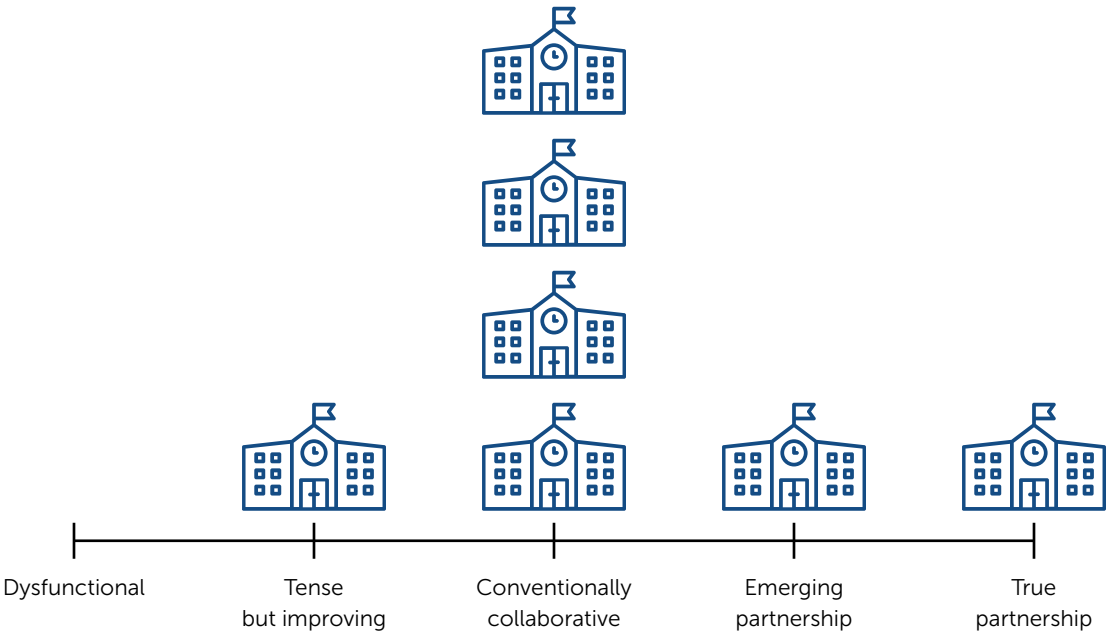
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<sup>6</sup> One case study district developed multiple topical MOUs (e. g., on distance learning, hybrid instruction, early return of special education students, and particular needs of speech and language pathologists).

<sup>7</sup> Salaries, benefits, and layoffs were not topics of initial pandemic MOUs. As part of his March 13, 2020, executive order, Governor Newsom froze state funding for schools for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year, holding salaries and benefits constant and precluding layoffs.

The seven districts that participated in this study can be arrayed on a four-category spectrum of labor-management relationships (Figure 1). One district represented a “true partnership” and one an “emerging partnership.” Four districts were classified as “conventionally collaborative.” The final district’s labor-management relationships were “tense but improving.”

**Figure 1.** Distribution of Case Study Districts on Labor-Management Continuum



Labor-management relationships in all study districts were tested by the pandemic. Study results showed that relationships in some districts bent a bit but none broke; some even strengthened. The challenges presented by the pandemic neither derailed existing collaboration nor exacerbated prepandemic labor-management tensions. Indeed, meeting the challenges of the pandemic seemed to contribute in two districts to improving labor-management relations.

**Category 1: True partnership.** One district, ABC Unified, maintained a long-standing partnership with its teacher union, a much more developed and mature professional relationship than in the other study districts.

**ABC Unified School District and the ABC Federation of Teachers.** The ABC Unified School District (ABCUSD), which serves approximately 21,000 students in Los Angeles County, is nationally recognized for its quarter-century-long partnership with the ABC Federation of Teachers (ABCFT). This labor-management relationship, born originally of a 1993 strike, has led to a deep culture of trust and collaboration between the district and the union. Now institutionalized, this collaboration is woven into the fabric of the district and has become a seminal part of “the way we do business here.”

District and union share a common vision and a common set of goals. Labor–management agreements are considered collective commitments to which each side is obligated. Formally described as a partnership (often short-handed as “PAL,” or partnership with administration and labor), ABC’s labor–management relationship functions under the mantra, “We will not let each other fail.” As the union president explained, “we’re constantly working on collective messages” that advance mutual interests.

District and union interviewees emphasized that their collaborative work centers fundamentally on students and student learning. The labor–management partnership’s joint mission statement punctuates this intention:

The ABC Partnership is a collaborative effort to improve student achievement and to enhance the teaching and working environment for faculty, staff, and administration through the institutional partnering of colleagues in the ABC Unified School District and the ABC Federation of Teachers. Faculty and administration ... have a voice in those decisions that reflect the collaborative efforts and goals of the partnership emphasizing a common understanding of the issues, joint research, sharing of information, mutual respect, and working together to ensure each other’s success. (American Federation of Teachers, 2012, p. 5)

ABCUSD and ABCFT collaborate on a wide range of issues within and outside the usual parameters of collective bargaining. Interviewees talked about working on “projects,” issues that are of the moment, in what the superintendent described as “purposeful collaboration.” This pre-COVID-19 joint work created a solid foundation that has enabled the district and union to tackle new challenges over time, COVID-19 being the most recent example. The superintendent explained: “You can build trust when you work together on a project that has nothing to do with things that need to be negotiated.”

Recognition of ABC’s district–union partnership permeates the district’s culture. Mention of the partnership often came unbidden. When interviewees were asked how ABC made decisions about its responses to COVID-19 challenges, the answer often was “the [labor–management] partnership.”

Mutual respect has long been an important element of ABC’s labor–management relationship. According to established norms of behavior, district and union leaders work to understand the core of each other’s jobs and figuratively walk in each other’s shoes. They set their goals to solve problems, not just to win arguments. This set of norms stood the district in good stead as it tackled the challenges of the pandemic. One district administrator explained: “What was critical for us was to really get an understanding of each other’s roles and understand each other’s perspective, and understand how we would work together and why that was important for the overall organization.”

ABCUSD has enjoyed the advantage of stable district and union leadership. The superintendent and union president have held their positions for approximately a decade. The union's predecessor initiated the collaborative labor–management relationship with the previous superintendent. These long-standing relationships have helped to cement the partnership.

Interviewees reported that the labor–management relationship facilitated a quick and efficient response to COVID-19. A 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." As is conventional practice in ABCUSD, the district and union approached the pandemic as a common challenge requiring a common solution. All teachers were online with devices during the first week that schools closed for in-person instruction; virtual school was up and running within a week's time. The district and union quickly negotiated their first COVID-19 MOU and managed to maintain cooperation through joint decision-making throughout the 2020–21 school year.

One example of a knotty decision that the district and union faced together was the matter of pandemic grading policies. A central office administrator explained:

*We also decided that we needed to revise our grading policy. ... That's where that [partnership] structure came into play, because immediately I had my supervisors of ... instruction and director of special education working with their [union] partners, talking about what do grades mean in a virtual context? What do we need to communicate to parents about how students are progressing? What do we need to communicate to students about their progress? Because we have established committees under the partnership structure, we just went to those entities to move this. We were able to get an MOU on a change in the grading policy in a very short window. And it was because of that partnership, which was built on years of trust, years of follow-through, years of listening to each other.*

As this quotation indicates, the district and union have established multiple systems of communication which, several interviewees said, helped ABCUSD work through complex COVID-19-related issues.

Following the pattern established before COVID-19, the superintendent and union president met weekly. Each central office leader was partnered with a counterpart in union leadership and met regularly. School-site union representatives met once or twice a month with their principals. These frequent, regular meetings helped ensure that district and union leaders and beyond were kept apprised of issues as they arose and were part of crafting resolutions. The district and union continued to produce, separately and together, an array of written communications. For example, the district distributed a "Monday message" and the union a Friday newsletter.

As noted, a central element of the ethos of the labor–management partnership is that the union is involved in key district decisions. A middle school principal commented: “When decisions are made, the union is brought to the table.” That operating principle experienced a bit of a hiccup during the early days of the pandemic but recovered swiftly. The union president explained:

*We weren’t included in some early, early conversations ... between the district and the board, but that changed really fast as we all realized that, “The way we’ve been communicating for decades is going to help us to get through this,” and so we reverted right back to where we were.*

These strong ties were also cited as facilitating the district’s response to racial injustice. According to one labor leader, the strong partnership between labor and management helped them listen and respond to calls for change. Others attributed their strong response to years of training focused on equity and cultural proficiency. One administrator explained:

*Well over a year ago, the board really started pushing hard on equity. ... We did some equity training at the board level and, actually, every level of our employee groups too, so all of our employees have gone through equity training. But I think because we were starting to look through that equity lens pretty hard, I think that really helps. [It] kind of paved the way for a smoother transition into this crisis.*

**Category 2: Emerging partnership.** Labor–management relations in the Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) had long been tense, troubled, and often volatile. Recently, the district–union relationship had begun to evolve and seemed to be moving towards a more partnership-like working arrangement.

**Fresno Unified School District and the Fresno Teachers Association.** FUSD serves 73,000 students in California’s San Joaquin Valley. The relationship between the school district and the Fresno Teachers Association (FTA) was an emerging partnership at the time of this study. Not long before, it was an entirely different story.

“Toxic” best described labor–management relations in Fresno for many of the pre-COVID-19 years. Matters reached the brink in late 2017 when the FTA threatened to strike. New leadership in the district and the union—Superintendent Bob Nelson and FTA President Manuel Bonilla—decided to choose a different path. With help from a conflict resolution team based at Fresno Pacific University, district and union leadership initiated a series of meetings to assess, in the words of a conflict resolution team leader, “how the parties could move forward in a different way [by] working on the nature of their relationship, talking about what that had been, what they would like it to be, and what it’s going to take to get there.” The FTA president described how the parties decided to begin their work: “We said, ‘What if we just get the heads of [the district and union] together and ... have a conversation? Let’s put bargaining aside and let’s have a conversation.’”

Described by the Fresno Pacific team as “a serendipitous kind of relationship, the right people at the right place at the right time,” the superintendent and union president and their teams approached their work from two perspectives: (a) solving the immediate problem of the threatened strike and (b) building a foundation for the future. The strike was averted, teachers had a contract for the first time in 18 months, and labor and management began down the path towards a more collaborative relationship.

Fresno’s collaborative labor–management relationship was still finding its way at the time of this study, with evidence suggesting it was continuing to grow and develop. A district administrator commented: “I think that labor relations have been probably the best they’ve ever been.”

As a display of collaboration, when COVID-19 forced schools to close for in-person instruction, the district and union released a joint statement to teachers and administrators:

During this unprecedented health crisis and districtwide closure, our primary focus is our students’ belonging and connectivity, along with the overall medical, mental, and physical well-being of our students, families, and employees. As we prepare for an extended period of school closures, the purpose of this document is to provide clarity of how, organizationally, we will provide learning opportunities to our students. (Fresno Unified School District, 2020)

The statement went on to describe distance learning priorities, expectations for teachers, and district obligations under new COVID-19 protocols. The district and union both indicated in interviews that issuing a single statement rather than separate ones was designed to reflect that the district and union were on the same page as COVID-19 challenges began to arise, an important step in relationship building. Superintendent Nelson noted: “Trust is not built around talking trust. It is built on making and keeping collective commitments.”

District and union leaders were cognizant of the challenges of distance learning but also acknowledged the health and safety dilemmas of returning to in-person instruction for students, families, and district staff as they tried to decide what fall 2020 might look like. Both sides agreed the primary focus would be on students’ learning needs. The union president explained: “Really we were designing something ... to meet the needs of our students. How do we meet the academic needs of our students? The teaching and planning needs of our educators and all staff?” A school principal commented: “I think [the district] went above and beyond. And our labor partners have gone above and beyond in doing their part. [Everyone did] what’s right for kids.”

To reach and implement an agreement, the parties fell back on the work they had done with Fresno Pacific. The union president explained that the new relationship enabled the district and union to resolve otherwise thorny issues quickly: “Because of that process, we were able to navigate a little bit more efficiently” to get things done. The superintendent said:



"We made a commitment that we're going to stay together. We tr[ie]d to stay in regular communication because that always seem[ed] to be better than us not being in communication."

The district and union were quick to acknowledge in interviews that, budding collaboration notwithstanding, they do not always see eye to eye on matters, but they say their efforts to remain collaborative have prevented disagreements from becoming roadblocks to progress. The superintendent said: "We have a lot of hard conversations, but that's not to say that we don't come to common ground."

ABC and Fresno represent outliers in terms of labor–management relationships. Their full and emerging partnerships are 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. Labor–management relationships in the next set of study districts reflect relationships more common to California school districts.

**Category 3: Conventionally collaborative relationships.** Labor–management relations are often described as contentious, the district versus the union. ABC and Fresno school districts illustrate a different kind of labor–management relationship than the norm. That being said, collaboration between districts and their teacher unions has been more common in California during the COVID-19 pandemic than has typically been recognized.

Results of a May 2021 study commissioned by the California Labor Management Initiative revealed that the majority of study districts (11 of 12), which were selected to reflect California's geographic, demographic, and economic diversity, characterized their labor–management relationships as "collaborative" (Koppich, 2021). District and union leaders spoke of making collective commitments to solve problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic. While labor and management were up front about not always reaching accord easily, they emphasized that they found ways to tackle pandemic-related challenges together because the unprecedented circumstances required that they find common ground.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that interviewees in four case study districts (in addition to the two partnership districts) described their labor–management relationships as largely collaborative or heading in that direction.

Unlike in the partnership districts, however, labor–management relations in these districts generally tended to be somewhat less comprehensive and more transactional. The district, for example, might solicit the union's opinion on matters, but this tended to take the form of conversations or seeking input rather than engaging in collaborative planning or decision-making. A union leader noted: "[The superintendent] ... brings in the union and says, 'This is what I'm thinking of doing, what do you think?'" A union leader in another district commented: "[The superintendent] ... gives me [a] heads up [about] issues coming up."

Two of these districts and their unions noted improving labor–management relationships as a result of new superintendents, although at the time of the study it was still unclear what “improving” would look like in practice. One union president said: “There was no trust and no honesty with the previous superintendent. He didn’t involve the union in anything.” The new superintendent was lauded for at least being responsive to the union.

The union president in one district reported the new superintendent had expressed interest in reestablishing interest-based bargaining.<sup>8</sup> The superintendent’s predecessor had rejected interest-based bargaining, previously the norm in this district, in favor of a more adversarial and confrontational labor–management style. The union leader expressed hope that the new superintendent would restore the more collaborative approach and reset labor–management relations.

Interestingly, two of these districts and unions worked for the first few months of COVID-19 school closures without formal agreements. One union president said: “We didn’t even have an MOU for the original distance learning portion. We just did it.” Both districts and their unions developed MOUs when it became clear the pandemic would not be a short-term proposition. A union president noted: “We started negotiating because obviously, [COVID-19] was going to go longer and we needed to have something more in place.”

**Category 4: Tense but improving labor–management relationship.** Labor–management relations in the final study district were “tense though improving.” COVID-19 challenges, rather than further fraying district–union interactions as might have been expected, seemed to create space for potential new beginnings.

This district had been a collaborative labor–management relations pioneer in California’s early days of collective bargaining, but it had been unable to sustain this approach. Labor–management relations were tense and remained largely so during the pandemic. The first COVID-19 MOU, for example, was delayed when the district initially refused to bargain with the union over health and safety matters. Finally, this logjam was broken, and the district and union concluded an initial agreement.

Thereafter, the district and union made common cause, banding together in the face of increasing COVID-19 politicization. They committed to showing a united public front as they grappled with issues like how long to continue distance learning and when and how to reopen schools for in-person instruction. The superintendent and union president met regularly to deal with these and other pandemic-related challenges as both acknowledged that COVID-19 presented a situation in which there was no advantage to either side blaming the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Under this system of bargaining, union and management focus on interests rather than positions and develop agreements for mutual gain.

In this district, the multiple and unprecedented challenges of the pandemic seemed to uncover fresh opportunities for labor–management collaboration and offered a glimmer of hope for more collaborative labor–management relationships in the future. This idea of crisis creating opportunity was raised in the interview we conducted with a state CTA official at the very outset of this study. This official noted: “Both parties [union and management] are probably more motivated than normal [during] the crisis. It represents a clear opportunity because I don’t think anybody disagrees that this is a really, really tough environment.”

**Pandemic labor–management relations and classified employees.** Labor–management relations also encompassed relationships between districts and unions representing classified employees. These unions’ MOUs around pandemic work issues, like the teachers’, focused primarily on issues of health and safety and COVID-19-related job responsibilities.

Classified employees, the majority of whom are low income and people of color—food service workers, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, custodians, and school secretaries—have also faced special challenges during the pandemic. While teachers generally were able to work from home or choose whether to work from home or school, classified employees were often designated “essential workers” at the outset of the pandemic and required to report to their school sites. One school principal noted: “Janitors [and] office staff needed to be on the front line. Teachers had an option. [Classified staff] were ... here, and they were not complaining, but people were scared to be here.”

Case study districts that had labor–management relationships characterized as on the partnership spectrum reported generally positive relationships with classified-employee unions. In one district, classified-employee unions were part of the formal labor–management collaboration. This solid collaborative arrangement made it possible for the district and union to avoid layoffs of classified staff as the parties agreed early in the pandemic to shifting some classified workers’ job responsibilities, with bus drivers assisting grounds people, for example, and other classified employees distributing meals to students and families in the community.

In one district that also maintained a collaborative relationship with classified-employee unions, a district administrator singled out food service workers for praise:

*The people that have been working since day one are food service workers, and they are among our lowest paid workers in the entire district [and they are] now recognized. I think in some ways that [labor–management] relationship is strengthening because they have heard more thank yous and more gratitude than they probably ever have. They’ve been in the shadows. Our kids just got fed every day. Nobody thought about it too much. Now, that’s recognized.*

In other study districts, however, COVID-19-related work challenges strained relations between classified employees and management. Classified-employee union leaders in some study districts told interviewers they felt their districts had failed to protect them adequately and had not sought their counsel in making decisions that affected them. These employees were often required to work out of classification and assume responsibilities not usually part of their jobs. Whereas in ABCUSD this dilemma was resolved amicably, in other study districts, classified workers were not involved in the decision and not given much of a choice, creating tension and animosity. A central office administrator explained:

*I think that there's this ... resentment [between classified staff and district leadership]. Here are people who are literally keeping our families alive, housed, clothed, and fed who are not receiving any ... support from the district and they want us to be all one big happy family.*

Classified employees in several study districts faced one more challenge that teachers did not. Although the governor's March 2020 executive order protected teachers from layoffs during the initial months of the pandemic, classified employees who worked on "soft" money like grant funding did not enjoy this same shield. Indeed, classified employees in some study districts had been laid off or were anticipating layoffs at the time of interviews. The threat of layoffs put classified-employee unions under significant pressure to support district demands and work out of classification in tacit exchange for no layoffs. One district administrator noted: "[Our classified union] has always been supportive of us during this pandemic because they want to work. They don't want to lose any more people."

**Challenges to labor–management relations.** 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 workforce.

**Added tensions created by COVID-19.** Politicization of COVID-19 created added labor–management complexity and tensions. Community politics in study districts, especially around reopening schools for in-person instruction, created pressures that were reflected in relationships between districts and unions. In one study site, for example, the district and union agreed on a return date based on what both sides agreed were safety concerns for students and staff. Some community members advocated for an earlier return date and publicly accused the union of "holding the students hostage." "Things got really tense," said the union president, and continued:

*Sometimes it really became the whims of this parent or of that small group of parents, the loudest [voice] as opposed to having our philosophical grounding as to why we're making this decision. [Were it not for] the politicization, [union and management] would have been completely on the same page.*

In another district, parents who wanted schools to reopen more quickly for full in-person instruction took their views to the school board, generally blaming the union for what they viewed as delay. One parent who expressed the belief that COVID-19 was a hoax said: "I just feel like [the district] is being held captive by unions and not able to do what's right for our kids."

Comments from the union president and a district administrator reflected the dilemma this district faced. The union president said: "We have a group of very angry and vocal parents who have been pounding the board since day one about bringing us all back." Yet a district administrator added: "No matter how loud [these parents] are, we have to make the decision that's best for everybody." An administrator from another district experiencing COVID-19 politicization summed up the issue: "It's the most difficult political landscape to navigate because ... you want to be responsible ... to your employees, your community, and your students who need help and that is rough right now, really rough."

In another study district, politicization of COVID-19 rattled the labor–management relationships in an unexpected way. The union president explained:

*[Before COVID-19] I had a standing meeting with the superintendent every month. We would share issues. I mean, we worked on things together. This year ... I feel like [the superintendent] became a little bit more political with me, and less honest in communications.*

**Teacher and staff burnout and exhaustion.** Among the issues we heard most about from administrators, teachers, and staff were pandemic-created burnout and exhaustion. Remote teaching and learning had presented utterly unfamiliar circumstances, including figuring out synchronous and asynchronous teaching, learning new forms of "classroom management" and student engagement, dealing with increased demands for communication with parents and families, developing the capacity to integrate complex technology into teaching routines, and grappling with new curricula. When in-person instruction resumed, unfamiliar demands, roles, and protocols did not go away. Instead, they more often simply switched into higher gear, exacerbating teacher and staff exhaustion and burnout.

Across study districts, interviewees expressed consistent concerns about the physical and mental toll that efforts to adapt to the pandemic's demands were taking. One district superintendent described the situation this way:

*I think that it's one thing to think that you have your normal pattern of teaching and then when you get online, the same way doesn't work. And then you move to hybrid and have to change again. ... Teachers are emotionally exhausted.*

A principal echoed this sentiment: “So literally what we’ve been doing is spending every waking minute that would go towards working on our goals on just trying to stay afloat. ... People are exhausted.”

The pandemic presented the challenge of the endless teacher workday early on. One teachers’ union president explained:

*We didn’t have a clearly defined school day. Teaching became 24-7. Kids could get hold of [teachers] at any minute of the day, and we then were so worried and concerned about keeping them engaged that we were replying and responding. So we created this nonstop work schedule that [was] really unhealthy for us, but at the same time, giving kids a way to reach out to us [was] important. We needed to try to find a balance.*

This district and union worked towards that balance through a labor–management agreement (an MOU) that set some boundaries around workdays and responsibilities and built in support where that was possible.

Adding to the general sense of anxiety and exhaustion, teachers and staff found themselves confronting COVID-19’s human toll on their students and families. A district leader told researchers:

*This last week or the week before, we had to bury six parents. And so we were the one [teachers and administrators] that they go to and we don’t have any professional training [in] grief counseling. Burnout from that personal investment, I think, has become very real for my staff.*

**Postscript.** The challenges surfaced in our early research have persisted if not worsened since we concluded our study. The political tensions over COVID-19 have intensified, resulting in labor–management disruptions in some cases, while staff exhaustion has evolved in some instances to staffing shortages and acute fears of staffing crises.

**COVID-19 remains a political issue.** The virus continues to be a hot political topic, with communities still taking sides around mask and vaccine requirements and other health and safety issues—this as the Omicron variant continues to circulate and many people are wondering, “What comes next?”

The politics of the pandemic have exploded beyond the bounds of COVID-19. Now many communities are facing heated and sometimes violent school board meetings regarding what can and should be taught in schools—the most visible demonstration of community fissure being around a broadened-beyond-recognition view of critical race theory, but extending to other elements of the curriculum, such as teaching students about gender identity and sexual orientation.

**Labor–management disruptions.** Two study districts—interestingly, the ones with the most solid labor–management relations: ABC and Fresno—experienced some labor–management challenges.

On October 28, 2021, the FTA filed three grievances against the school district. These workload grievances accuse the district of violating expanding their workday by requiring teachers to substitute in classes during their preparation time or temporarily absorb absent colleagues' students into their own classes when substitutes are not available as well as requiring teachers on special assignment to act as perpetual substitutes. The union is alleging these practices negatively affect students by reducing teachers' time for planning lessons, grading papers, and doing other preparatory work. The district has acknowledged staffing challenges and reports it is working to hire additional substitutes and fill staff needs. How these matters will be resolved and what impact, if any, they will have on the labor–management relationship remain to be seen.

As reported on February 6, 2022, teachers in ABCUSD, "unhappy with the results of ongoing contract negotiations," planned to stage a work slowdown on February 7. ABCFT President Ray Gaer told a local Southern California news service that the teachers' union "would like to create the necessary amount of pressure on the ABC Board members to encourage them to take another look at the value of their employees" (City News Service, 2022).

As of this writing, the issues in both districts have been resolved. The Fresno grievances were "put in abeyance" at the end of January 2022. The district agreed to pay teachers who are required to substitute at a per diem rate and continues to strive to hire more substitutes. In February, ABCUSD and ABCFT settled the contract. Among the new agreements is a 5 percent pay raise for teachers and other members of the bargaining unit retroactive to July 1, 2021, and an extension of COVID-19 supplemental paid sick leave.

That Fresno and ABC had labor–management challenges—and resolved them—reflects the strength of their relationships. Both districts and unions acknowledged their labor–management issues and worked to bring about solutions as expeditiously as they could. Less mature or weaker relationships might have been broken by these contract disputes. In Fresno and ABC, they were not.

**Staffing crises, layoffs, and the fiscal cliff.** Results of a RAND study during the height of the pandemic revealed that increasing numbers of teachers were considering leaving the profession and higher proportions were reporting job-related stress, sometimes coupled with depression (Steiner & Woo, 2021). A survey conducted in January 2022 by the National Education Association of its members confirms this ongoing crisis (Jotkoff, 2022). Three quarters of teachers surveyed said they have had to fill in for colleagues or take on other duties because of staff shortages. More than 90 percent reported that pandemic stress and burnout were serious problems. In addition, more than half of survey respondents (55 percent) said they likely would leave the education profession sooner than they had originally planned.

The school-staffing crisis is not limited to teachers. Classified staff in some categories are in short supply as well: school bus drivers, for example. On January 4, 2022, the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that, in coordination with the U.S. Department of Education, states could temporarily waive a designated portion of the commercial driver's license skills test (identifying the "under the hood" engine components) to help alleviate challenges districts and schools are facing finding enough school bus drivers (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Districts in California and across the country are also reporting shortages of paraeducators, especially in special education classes, and of school custodians.

Teacher sick-outs over school health and safety conditions in San Francisco, Oakland, and Chicago have made national news. Districts express growing alarm about unanticipated teacher retirements, staff turnover, and what has now been described as a full-blown school-staffing crisis.

California's education-staffing crisis continues to mushroom. EdSource reported: "The persistent teacher shortage, coupled with higher-than-usual retirements and resignations during the pandemic, has district officials scrambling to fill classrooms this school year, even as additional state and federal funding gave them the ability to hire more staff" (Lambert, 2022). Some districts are responding to the staffing crisis by increasing teacher pay, offering bonuses, and developing incentives to try to keep teachers in the classroom or lure them back. Yet many schools remain understaffed. With adequate numbers of substitutes often unavailable, districts are resorting to assigning school counselors or administrators to fill in for absent teachers. This situation is further disrupting students' education and seems untenable, and a solution does not appear to be on the horizon.

The staffing crisis notwithstanding, many districts, faced with a looming fiscal cliff when one-time federal dollars expire and dealing with declining enrollments, are sending layoff notices to teachers. Teachers were "held harmless," precluded from being laid off during the first period of the pandemic due to the governor's executive order that froze education dollars. Now all bets are off, and many teachers were expected to receive "intent to lay off" notices in advance of the March 15 state deadline (Fensterwald, 2022). Some portion of the March 15 notices likely would not be carried out to full layoff status. Nonetheless, the possibility of layoffs might take a toll on teacher and staff morale.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the effects of layoff-induced job threats, see Strunk, K. O., Goldhaber, D., Knight, D. S., & Brown, N. (2018). Are there hidden costs associated with conducting layoffs? The impacts of RIFs and layoffs on teacher effectiveness. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 37(4), 755–782.



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## Community–District Relationships

During the pandemic, the relationships between the districts and their communities changed and, in many cases, grew more contentious. Since 2013, community engagement has been enshrined in state policy and is expected to be a key lever to hold districts accountable for delivering effective education for all students. The Local Control Funding Formula requires districts to consult with a parent advisory committee, the English learner parent advisory committee, and parents, students, teachers, principals, other school personnel, local bargaining units, and community members to develop goals and plans for resource allocation. The main legislative tool to promote engagement activities at the district level is the annual development of the LCAP. Since 2014, California school districts, charter schools, and COEs have embarked on a flurry of sincere efforts to allow opportunities for stakeholders to participate in the development of improvement strategies. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the nature of state-mandated efforts to engage stakeholders but also expanded districts' relationships with community organizations in some cases.

The pandemic led to the suspension of the LCAP and the accountability and support system (the California School Dashboard and the System of Support). The LCAP was replaced by the LCP: a document to encourage districts to address the impact of the pandemic on students' academic and social-emotional well-being. The pandemic also forced districts to focus on delivering information and services. As we noted earlier, districts assumed responsibility for providing meals, computers, and internet access. In some cases, districts provided comprehensive economic, social, and emotional supports for struggling families, sometimes through partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs).

This section focuses on district and community relations, particularly district and parent relations, in our seven case study districts. First, we report on districts' multiple efforts to communicate with stakeholders, and then we turn to districts' strategies to engage the community and solicit input in decision-making. Next, we describe how the pandemic led to increased partnerships between districts and CBOs to address urgent family needs. We then examine more closely how one community, with the guidance of community organizers, worked with its school district to reinvent the whole notion of engagement and how that reinvention made its collective response to the pandemic a model for others. Finally, we discuss some of the challenges to district–community relations that surfaced in our case study districts. A postscript describes more current circumstances in our study districts.

**Communicating to stakeholders.** March 2020 was the beginning of the ongoing disruption of lives by the COVID-19 pandemic. As parents, teachers, administrators, staff, and students scrambled to adjust to the closing down of businesses, schools, and public institutions, school districts found themselves in the position to be a critical source of information. This was not an easy role to play as “the facts” about the virus kept changing and guidance from state and local health departments was often confusing.

Our case study districts had a range of strategies and capacity to communicate with parents and community members. Some had a sophisticated communications and public relations operation that tended to promote the district's response to the pandemic and provide families with positive messages. One district administrator explained: "We kind of shifted from a campaign of talking about what we're doing to being more of a campaign about positive messaging. ... So, it's been very intentional to be more positive and motivational."

Some districts focused on the hard work and sacrifices of teachers and support staff in communications to their communities. Another district administrator told us:

*I get this from my friends. Now schools are out, you must have nothing to do. Please, these people have never worked harder, right? I mean, they're trying to reinvent school each and every day to make sure that kids aren't falling behind. ... We need to show our community that our teachers are doing what they do best, they're teaching. They're finding ways to reach their students.*

Districts' efforts to underscore the hard work of teachers and staff seemed to work initially, as parents tended to view teachers, administrators, and classified staff as heroes. But as the pandemic dragged on, in some cases, parent support for teachers' and districts' efforts to employ distance learning gradually eroded. Parents increasingly saw that their children struggled with being away from their peers and in-person schooling. In some cases, the challenges of distance learning revealed a weak curriculum and very limited synchronous instructional time. Parents also struggled with supervising their children's education while trying to earn a living. One school leader described it:

*This area here is a lot of agriculture, or parents are working all day, or parents who might not know English and might not be technology savvy. So, they do encounter difficulties in the sense that we do things in English and Spanish, but now we added another component that makes it hard and that's technology, because now everything is through the computer or the laptop.*

Next, we examine districts' efforts to solicit input from parents, students, teachers, staff, and community members as part of the state requirements to develop LCPs.

**Districts' efforts to solicit input from stakeholders.** Senate Bill 98 established the LCP and gave districts a very tight timeline to develop the plan and solicit input from stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, administrators, other school staff, and local labor organizations. The template was released August 1, 2020, and the plan needed to be completed and approved by September 30, 2020. The LCPs included district reports of their efforts to get the input of various stakeholders to help guide the development of the plan for addressing the challenges of the pandemic. A review of the case study districts' LCPs revealed a consistent

approach to community engagement from district to district. Districts surveyed parents, teachers, staff, and occasionally students for their views on reopening schools. They typically held virtual meetings with various advisory groups, such as the LCAP Parent Advisory Committee and the English Learner LCAP Parent Advisory Committee. A few districts established large committees of stakeholders and district officials (as many as 75 members) to develop a comprehensive plan for teaching, learning, and reopening. Districts increasingly relied on technology (Zoom) to give interested parties access to school board and advisory committee meetings. Table 2 summarizes the engagement activities that the seven case study districts employed.

**Table 2.** District Engagement Activities Reported in Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans

Activity	Proportion of districts conducting
Surveys	7/7
Advisory committees	7/7
Website postings	7/7
Meetings with parents	5/7
Meetings with unions	5/7
Meetings with students	3/7
Call centers	2/7
Reopening committee	2/7
Site councils	1/7

The LCPs provide a general sense of the districts’ engagement activities, but most do not shed much light on the specific recommendations of parents, students, teachers, staff, or community members or indicate if those recommendations are reflected in the LCP. The tendency of districts to view state-mandated reports (like the LCAP) as compliance activities seems to have carried over to the LCP. This was particularly true given the overwhelming demands on districts that resulted from the pandemic. In addition, the quality and level of detail of the LCPs appear to vary based on district capacity. Large districts with a designated staff member assigned to completing the LCP generally had more thorough plans than small districts that did not have a designated staff member.

We did find some examples of stakeholder input that clearly informed district decisions. For example, one district adjusted the distance learning instructional time blocks based on feedback from staff, parents, and students. One central office administrator explained:

*Our learning plan and the schedule for learning was partially developed based on parents saying, “Well, we would prefer to have Mondays be a shortened day versus Wednesdays because Monday...” And so those kinds of things were different because of the input that parents gave.*

In another district, officials reported that the pandemic pushed them to reach out to groups whose voices were not always heard, as one school principal explained:

*COVID forced us to do things we should have been doing all along in terms of partnering with parents. ... [We] reached out to churches and community organizations in neighborhood[s]—relationships strengthened in last year—got huge response to [district] parent survey about returning to school in person in April.*

Parents in one district were vocal about technology problems and successfully got the school board's attention, as one administrator told us:

*We heard from communities in which the internet was not effective, even the hot spots that we had originally purchased still weren't really working well. And so the board said, "We need you guys to spend more money on a better quality hotspot." And we did.*

School closures were difficult for most parents, and our case study districts were cautious about reopening out of concerns about safety and consistency, as one superintendent explained:

*We felt and we heard from our community that consistency was important, that they didn't want to open and close, and open and close, and open and close, right? That was definitely a factor in waiting as long as we have.*

As described further in the following section, one district relied on a community partner to maintain a strong understanding of community needs during the pandemic, reportedly transforming the District English Learner Advisory Committee into a space where "families' voices are heard."

Next, we describe how the pandemic elevated and expanded partnerships between districts and CBOs.

**Partnerships with community-based organizations.** The pandemic led some districts to leverage previously established partnerships with CBOs to provide or expand services for students and their families. These partnerships provided direct support beyond what the district could do on its own.

As the pandemic continued, few parents were happy with distance learning (Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020). Recognizing the weakness of distance learning and the disconnect of some students, three of our 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 two cases, the local organizations provided these services to families but did not collaborate closely with the district.

One district developed more of a two-way partnership, expanding its relationship with the community organization that had previously provided extended-day programs to open on-site learning hubs serving about 10 percent of the district's students. These students included those lacking internet access, adequate space at home to participate in distance learning, parent supervision, meals, or supports needed to succeed. Ultimately, the hubs served students of essential workers, youth in foster care and experiencing homelessness, newcomers, and students who had disengaged from their schools. The district and the program leaders prioritized communication about the health and safety measures they were taking to reassure parents, as the superintendent explained:

*I think there was lots of hesitancy in our families. ... As the months have passed ... our families just feel more comfortable. ... What we noticed is that we've had to be intentional with ensuring our families know what we're doing.*

What was particularly notable about this district's partnership was the close collaboration and communications with the CBO. The district did not just farm out support services but instead worked closely to integrate the collective efforts to support students and their families. The superintendent asked school educators to identify students who were disengaged from distance learning and would benefit from participation. The leader of the CBO was also invited to participate in planning conversations around district in-person learning, a further sign of the two-way partnership.

Other districts enlisted CBOs to help them reach out to students and families who were no longer participating in distance learning or whom the district had identified as needing support. Some district officials reported that some student groups and their families were particularly affected by the pandemic. Research has shown that English-learning, low-income, Native American, Black, and Latinx students lost far more ground academically in math and English language arts than their White and Asian American peers (Education Analytics, n.d.).

Some district officials reported that Black students had the lowest attendance rates during remote learning. These reports were confirmed by various media reports (Anderson, 2020; Harris, 2020; Hickman, 2021). While one community organization partnered with one of our districts to make home visits within the Black community, they were also critical of the district's approach to Black students and families both before and during the pandemic, as one interviewee reported:

*Yeah, and I'm going to be honest. Even in school, right, our Black kids fall behind. Even when school [is] in session, so even now so more. ... They [the school district staff] don't know how to communicate with our African American parents. They don't know how to get them involved.*

One district was particularly proactive in partnering with local service organizations to address the social-emotional and mental health needs of its students. During the pandemic, the various organizations turned to “teletherapy” and worked closely with the district to identify students needing help. Another district partnered with a CBO to provide mental health services through school-based wellness centers (that existed prior to COVID-19). In some communities, local organizations were proactively helping families and provided services that ran parallel to district efforts.

Ultimately, partnerships with community organizations work because they can assist families in ways that school districts cannot, as one representative of a community organization told us:

*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. ... Help them find jobs, mentor and support them, financial partnerships. I do a lot of intervention with the youth, gang intervention and prevention and stuff like that. ... Church is a big aspect of a lot of the stuff that we do ... so 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.*

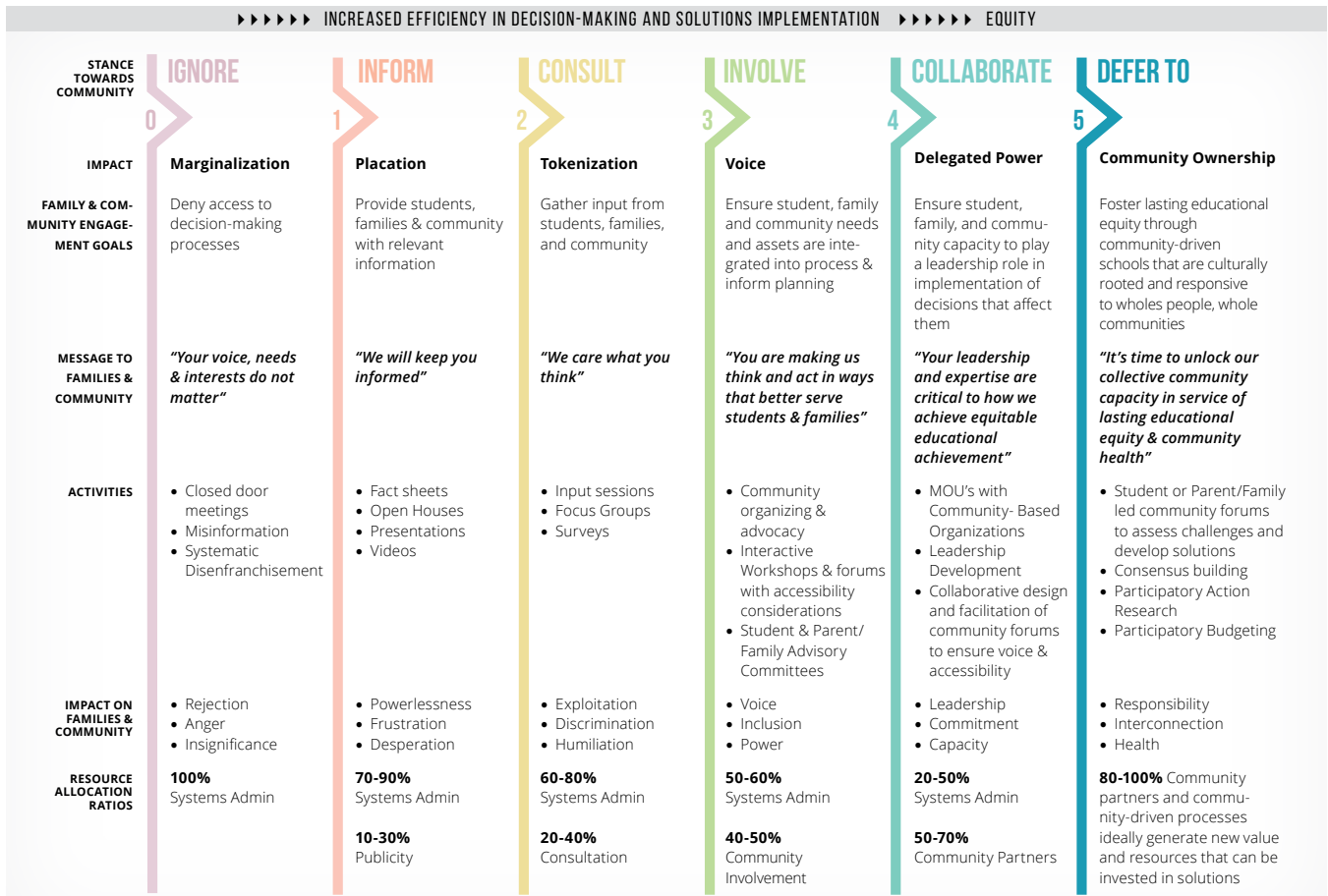
**Building community engagement: The case of the Alisal Union School District.** The state’s requirements for stakeholder engagement are largely directed at what activities districts enact to provide parents, teachers, staff, students, and community members opportunities to give their input. Among our seven case study districts, Alisal Union School District (AUSD) stood out for the strength of its relationships with its community. As it turns out, creating meaningful engagement in AUSD was about both what the school district did and what parents, the community, and community organizers did. Next we highlight the AUSD story.

Alisal was an unincorporated community adjacent to Salinas, separated by a highway. When Salinas added Alisal to the city boundaries in 1963, the Alisal community lacked basic infrastructure and suffered from a severe housing shortage, extreme poverty, and poor educational outcomes. The infrastructure problems, poverty, and housing shortage remain, but remarkably, the educational outcomes of students and the effectiveness of the district have greatly improved.

AUSD was the first school district in California to be taken over by the state for a variety of performance deficiencies. The district’s path from state takeover to improvement was the result of multiple factors, most notably a 10-year infusion of foundation funds to build a network of community organizer, advocacy, and training groups made up of parents and community members. These networks built on a strong community culture that valued education and demanded more from the school district.

The community organizers viewed community engagement with the school district as a continuum leading to educational equity. Our interviewees generally believed that much work still needs to be done but that AUSD probably is at the Collaborate stage of the continuum. Figure 2 shows the continuum.

**Figure 2.** Spectrum of Family and Community Engagement for Educational Equity



Source: González, R. (2020). *Spectrum of family and community engagement for educational equity* [Case study]. Movement Strategy Center. [movementstrategy.org/resources/spectrum-of-family-community-engagement-for-educational-equity](https://movementstrategy.org/resources/spectrum-of-family-community-engagement-for-educational-equity)

District leadership proudly pointed to the steady improvement in student test scores from 2015 through 2019. But parents had additional concerns and worked to move the focus from just test scores to social and emotional support for children and their families. Extended parental pressure for the district to better attend to the social and emotional needs of students resulted in the hiring of a counselor at each school in 2019 and was an important step in building parent empowerment. One district established a Family Resource Center 30 years ago, and in response to parent and community pressure opened two more centers in the last 6 years.

Each of the centers offers a full range of services for families, including adult education, childcare, family support groups, emergency housing, and income assistance. These centers proved to be critical to assisting families upended by the pandemic, as they connected and advocated for families with a variety of city and county agencies.

The collaborative relationship between the district and the community also helped facilitate student and family access to computers and the internet as schools closed. According to the county superintendent, AUSD had built a strong technology infrastructure prior to the pandemic and was well ahead of other districts in providing distance learning. The district was able to equip every student with a computer and internet access, even those in remote areas of the district.

Collaboration was not easy, and tensions between parents and teachers grew during the pandemic and the district's reliance on distance learning. While teachers were concerned about the safety of returning to classrooms, parents—particularly those who were essential workers—were struggling to make ends meet and oversee their children's learning. A collaborative effort between parent organizations and the teachers' union led to a better understanding of the concerns of each side, as the district official who brought the two sides together explained:

*[There was an] ... absence of spaces for teachers and parents to really talk about what they're facing. ... [Parents did] not understand where the teachers were coming from and the limitations that they have, and also how they were [being taken] advantage as teachers, and the salary that they have. So it's a huge, huge need of understanding that both are facing that inequality of investment.*

A parent group called Padres Unidos has been central to the more collaborative relationship between the district and its stakeholders. Members of Padres Unidos include not only parents of current students but also parents and community members broadly concerned about the education of all children in the Alisal community. During the pandemic, both Padres Unidos and the district viewed themselves as partners in addressing student and family needs, as one close observer told us:

*What changed in the Alisal district compared to other districts is that they now work with the parents, they see them as a coworker, they know how to connect with the parents. ... They want parents to have meetings to get to the root of the problem that we are experiencing during the pandemic. So, organizing is a tool that districts are now seeing as critical for the changes needed.*



A parent confirmed the changed relationship with the district: “We’re like a family now, but we still we have our fights. ... So there’s a partnership of trust and knowing that we all play different roles.” Another parent told us: “We have more credibility now with the intention we have, which is to collaborate with them. ... I can say that the Board of the Department of Education now turns to us, they keep us in mind.”

The changes in the relationship between the district and parents is also reflected in the work of the various advisory committees. A parent member of the District English Learner Advisory Committee (DELAC) told us:

*The DELAC Committee is where parents who have children that are English language learners meet and we have been able to transform that space. In that place, there are directors, assistants to directors, recently we had a superintendent, directors of departments. What we do is organize ourselves and bring parents to that space and we have been able to change the dynamics. Now, the families’ voices are heard and they are using that group as a consulting group of the district to make decisions and to find out the needs of the community.*

Getting district officials and teachers to consider parent organizations as consultants required a shift in attitudes and beliefs. Just as parents needed to better understand the concerns of teachers and staff, educators came to understand that during the pandemic, parents were overwhelmed, as opposed to the old narrative that parents do not get involved because they do not care. One parent told us: “Now they know that they have us and they see us as people they are going to turn to in order to understand what the community needs right now.”

The AUSD story demonstrates that community development and educational improvement can be realized with a partnership of community activists, parents, educators, and district leadership. While the partnership does not avoid contentious debates, it does elevate parents’ voices—parents from a traditionally invisible demographic—and draws its strength from a local community that takes pride in its culture and prioritizes educational opportunity for its children.

One parent organizer explained:

*Now, the families’ voices are heard and they [the district] are using [us] as a consulting group for the district to make decisions and to find out the needs of the community, so I think that is something important that has happened.*

**Challenges to district–community relations.** Our interviews with district officials suggest that they made sincere efforts to give parents, teachers, staff, and students a voice in decision-making. During the pandemic, this was particularly challenging as districts necessarily had to respond to the immediate crisis. Although our case study districts employed technology to give stakeholders access to the decision-making process, the state’s requirements for community engagement in the development of the LCAP and LCP have led many districts to report that engagement had become a compliance activity (Humphrey et al., 2017). One LCP reported: “The District took all necessary actions to meet statutory requirements for stakeholder engagement with representatives of parents and guardians of pupils.” Some districts strengthened and expanded relationships with CBOs to try to address the multiple needs of students and families, but not all districts enjoyed the luxury of having robust, high-capacity local organizations.

Many of our case study districts struggled to maintain positive community relations as the pandemic became increasingly politicized and communities became increasingly polarized. Leaders in most of our districts found themselves in the middle of contentious debates, as one superintendent explained:

*I’ll get emails from people who are upset that we’re not opening up fully right away. I’ll alternate that with emails from people who are like, “How can you even think about opening up schools at all? There’s still a pandemic et cetera, et cetera.” There’s just a divide within the community about what’s desired and trying to navigate that, while also having the trust in our governance ... is challenging.*

School board members were similarly challenged, as one school board member reported:

*Well, I would say I may not have a diverse constituency in my trustee area in terms of demographics, but I definitely have a diverse constituency in terms of opinions about the direction of the district. ... I definitely get a lot of emails from my constituents about private schools [being] open, why can’t we open? I get some feedback of okay if you guys don’t open the schools fully, we’re going to take our kids elsewhere.*

Although school board meetings in our case study districts remained civil, media reports suggest that was not the case in other California districts (Kamenetz, 2021). As communities grew divided over school closures, mask policies, vaccination requirements, and distance learning, disinformation fueled increasingly personal accusations. One union official explained:

*I’ve never seen as much false information about either us as an organization or the district or particular people in different leadership roles, and so some of that is disheartening. ... I wish we were back in school and yet we can’t be at least according to what we believe is safe, right?*

**Postscript.** The pandemic disrupted all aspects of education in California, including the relationships between districts and the communities they serve. Our case study districts shifted from an emphasis on gathering input from stakeholders on education improvement strategies to delivering information on COVID-19 along with essential supports, including meals, computers, internet access, distance learning, and social-emotional services.

Most of the districts continue to employ sophisticated communication efforts and remain key players in delivering health and safety information to their communities. Some districts continue to use existing partnerships with local organizations and agencies to deliver both academic and social-emotional services to students and their families. All districts made significant efforts and continue those efforts to support students and families.

As the pandemic continued and schools reopened, each of our case study districts faced the daily disruption of teacher and staff shortages, and most were further disrupted by high student absenteeism. Most, but not all, of these districts managed to avoid the expressions of anger and discontent occurring in many school districts across the country and highlighted in the media. But as parents' frustrations grew over masking and vaccine mandates, school board meetings in some of our districts became contentious, and some districts faced parent and student protests. As the political climate became increasingly polarized, some parents and community members were influenced by false claims regarding critical race theory, unpatriotic portrayals of American history, ethnic studies, literature, mathematics, science, the arts, sex education, and most aspects of the school curriculum (Garbe et al., 2020; Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020; Klein, 2020; Teitelbaum, 2022).

This was not the case in all communities. For example, AUSD reportedly maintained healthy district–community relations even as the most recent wave of the pandemic surged. In addition, the district and its community have agreed to implement a new program to better address student, family, and staff social and emotional needs. La Cultura Cura (developed by the National Compadres Network) employs cultural practices and traditions to create paths to healing.

The lessons from the case study districts regarding district–community relations do offer some hope. Districts' early and proactive communications to parents about COVID-19 helped provide accurate information in a rapidly changing environment. Comprehensive family supports sent a powerful message to parents that the district cared and was there to help. District partnerships with CBOs to deliver services helped make family support more coordinated and cohesive. Established efforts of community organizers to help parents play advocacy roles, along with local parent organizations, helped open channels of communication among various interest groups (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators, school board members).

## Other Relationships

When examining the roles of other government agencies, we consistently found that our case study districts generally appreciated financial support from the federal government but had concerns, viewed their relationships with state actors as challenging, and characterized relationships with county-level organizations as helpful in responding to the events of 2020–21. Relationships with city-level actors were noticeably absent.

**The federal government.** Although they did not consistently call out federal support, respondents acknowledged that the federal government had reinforced their crisis-response efforts. Implicit in all the health and safety actions was an understanding that the CDC was instrumental in guiding state and local public health policies to which districts were bound.

Perhaps the most frequent references to the federal government came when discussing funding. Administrators greatly appreciated the early federal relief funds, using them to purchase PPE as well as learning resources. In one district, Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) funds allowed the district to be “strategic” and purchase intervention programs for afterschool tutoring. Another district used the funds on new HVAC ventilation systems, seeing it as a wise use of “one-time funding.”

Nevertheless, some expressed apprehension about these one-time funds and how to maintain programs, cover recurring expenses, and address new needs. “The challenge when you’re dealing with negotiations is, all this is going to be one-time money,” said one administrator, “and so how do you convince these people at the table that it’s not meant for things that eat or breathe?” Several districts experiencing declining enrollment had particular concerns about these one-time funds in the face of growing academic and social-emotional needs of students. Although they wanted to hire more staff to support student needs, they were reluctant to do so given the imminent loss of one-time funds, the predicted loss of state hold-harmless provisions, and the expected decrease in average daily attendance (ADA). One central office leader explained:

*So if we lose 500, 700 students between now and the third year out, you have to make the necessary adjustments to your staffing to make sure that when you get to that third year [when they are no longer held harmless], you don’t have all of those expenditures from staff when you don’t have the students to pay for their salaries and benefits and so on and so forth. So it is difficult to gauge. ... So we’re going to have all of these opportunities to get additional funding, but it’s just one-time. How do you say to your board, “We need to reduce the staffing we have because of the loss in students,” and we have \$[XX] million that we need to spend?*

**The state.** As noted previously in the “State Policy Response” section, state policies bounded the decisions and actions of local actors. From the governor’s executive order in March 2020 holding districts harmless for lost revenue to the joint health and safety guidance from the CDE and CDPH to the suspension of state testing, state actions often dictated what districts could and could not do. Many actions taken—such as creating attendance task forces, revising grading policies, and prioritizing high-needs students for small-group in-person instruction—had clear ties to new state policies.

In some cases, however, state influence was not as clear. For example, our data could not confirm whether the state funding made available in March 2021 incentivizing in-person reopening (Assembly Bill 86) altered district plans.<sup>10</sup> While some may have acted quickly to “not leave that money on the table,” others resented the state meddling in plans already negotiated locally. In one district, the state’s announcement of funding coincided with the timing of the reopening already planned. The superintendent said this created the unfortunate appearance that the district was motivated by money rather than what was best for students. In another district, individuals were willing to acknowledge that state funds may have played a part in the accelerated timing of their return to in-person instruction. A school leader said:

*We had an original plan of not opening ‘till orange [the county-level Tier 3 rating of COVID-19 infection], but the minute it becomes political and you put \$80 million hanging on a fishing hook, all of a sudden it becomes even more dramatic ... because everybody gets a little piece of that pie to do what’s right for our staffs, and our students in the community.*

Other leaders noted that public pressure and the availability of teacher vaccinations contributed to the timing decision.

While universally grateful for the increased funding and adjustments afforded, most interviewees expressed deep frustration with the constantly changing or inconsistent guidance from state leaders and agencies or between the state and county governments. The following statements are typical of those heard across the districts:

*[A]s things began to worsen, just somewhere between June and now, the lack of consistency ... the differences between the state and the county levels. ... 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. (Central office administrator)*

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<sup>10</sup> We also know that statewide, several districts, including Santa Ana and San Bernardino, chose not to pursue these funds.

*I would say one that's been very difficult are the mixed messages coming out of Sacramento. When the governor stands up and says, "If you're concerned, you should be able to stay home." But you're telling schools that you can open. It's publicly saying it wants "A," but it's moving to do every roadblock to stop you [from doing "A"]. (Central office administrator)*

*Governors can't change the rules every 3–5 days. He's got to stop. He's got this new four-foot rule. Where's that come from? There's no science... Six foot, I understand. ... You just made up four feet. You made it up. (School leader)*

*I wished the state when it came out with a clear set of rules for special education, instead of the special education line moving so quickly, that I couldn't catch that line. You know what I mean? I was literally chasing my tail around the Christmas tree. Because every time I got something set, the rule would change, the standard would change. (Central office administrator)*

Of course, many recognized the limited science around COVID-19 and were understanding of the state's difficulty navigating 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:

*Local control funding is great, but local control from this perspective is not great. So here they are trying to become experts now in these health aspects to get kids back in school. And I just don't know that the responsibility was appropriately designated towards school districts. But from a health perspective, we're not health experts, right? That's not what we're in the business of doing. So when you talk about giving us local control, that's where we're looking for guidance, that's where we're looking for direction, right? (Central office administrator)*

*[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. (School leader)*

**The 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 districts expressed gratitude for their COE’s immediate response to the pandemic, communication efforts, and in some cases, efforts to have all districts in the county close 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. Many were particularly grateful for communication brokered between districts and public health officials.

Several districts described the COE facilitating weekly calls between the county’s department of public health and all the districts in the county, giving district officials direct access to top county health officials. As schools began the reopening process, one county department of public health committed to visiting all schools when they reopened, as a county health official explained:

*We’re committed to doing a site visit for every single school in the county shortly after it reopens and brings students back. We send someone on site to kind of do a walkthrough and we observe compliance with our protocol. It’s not a heavy-handed or enforcement type of visit, it’s really meant to just support them and help them deal with any challenges they’re having. Yeah, it’s really meant to help them succeed, not to be punitive.*

Some COEs also held regular convenings of superintendents, which in some cases allowed districts in the county to be aligned in their response to the pandemic, as noted previously. In other cases, these meetings helped districts learn from one another’s experiences.

Some believed county support was most useful for smaller districts that lacked the central office resources of larger districts. In fact, leaders in several of our smaller districts were particularly appreciative of COE relational and material support. An administrator in one district called the COE a “coordinating steadying voice.” A superintendent in another smaller district valued the weekly meetings organized by the COE:

*It really helped really be able to be in a platform with other leaders from across the county where you were all going through ... we were all going through the same thing. And at the same time, we were also being able to listen and take away some of the learnings from some of the early adopters.*

Others in this district appreciated the tools and frameworks provided by the county. COE officials interviewed acknowledged a shift in their orientation to working with districts during the pandemic: “I really feel like that the districts have seen an evolution of the county office and one that is more of a support-based organization as opposed to a compliance authority.”

Of course, our limited sample means the county offices to which districts refer are not necessarily representative of all in the state.

**The city/town.** Local noneducation leaders and agencies were noticeably absent from the reported and observed district responses to the pandemic. We did not hear about local elected officials playing significant roles in district crisis-response efforts. Again, our sample is not representative of all districts statewide, and we imagine in other locales local officials might have had a bigger presence.

**Postscript.** With the expiration of hold-harmless provisions and the one-time nature of COVID-19-related federal and state monies, many districts in California are increasingly concerned about the possibility of a “fiscal cliff.” Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, districts throughout the state were facing declining student enrollment due to falling birth rates and demographic shifts (e.g., outward migration). The pandemic has only exacerbated this trend, with some districts facing dramatic drops in enrollment. According to one state official, prior to COVID-19, approximately 60 percent of districts were experiencing declining enrollments. In 2021, all but one of the state’s 58 counties saw a decline (Hong, 2022). This has been compounded by California’s system of funding schools based on ADA rather than on total enrollment.

The one-time-only funds present a particular challenge for districts with declining enrollment. Facing declining revenue in the future presents districts with dilemmas: Hire staff to provide supports for students needed as a result of the trauma of the pandemic yet face the likelihood of not having the funding to sustain these positions long-term. Districts are thus reluctant to use the plentiful one-time funds on staffing, so additional counselors, teachers, and other support staff can be offered only temporary contracts to maintain a balanced budget.

California lawmakers have responded by increasing funding for districts with higher concentrations of at-risk students (Hong, 2021). Additionally, the governor’s 2022–23 budget proposes to amend the current funding formula to minimize the impact of a single-year enrollment drop by allowing districts to “consider the greater of a school district’s current year, prior year, or the average of three prior years’ ADA” (California Department of Finance, 2022). Without concerted state action, many districts will face catastrophic funding increases in the coming year.

## Conditions Shaping Relationships

Looking across our districts and the various sets of stakeholders, several conditions appeared to help build and sustain relationships during this time of crisis and disruption. In this section, we examine three key conditions: leadership, external funding and partners, and local context.

**Leadership.** Among all 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. One superintendent explained:

*When I roll out information, I roll it out through my board, I roll it out through my cabinet, I roll it out through my principals and my association leaders, each into sequence cascading, ... [in] one consistent voice ... being respectful of the way that it should come out, not to surprise anybody.*

**Intentional and formal relationship building** was another frequently mentioned leadership practice. In one case study district, the superintendent reported regularly bringing board members into district trainings to purposefully build closer ties. In another district, a union leader spoke about the importance of developing a relationship with every board member and encouraging their executive leadership team to do the same. District leaders in another district reported a similar, yet more formalized practice. Each central office member was paired with a union leader, and each central office leader was in charge of a geographic region, responsible for outreach with that area’s city council member and organizations. According to interviews, these practices helped administrators establish closer personal relationships with key stakeholders. One central office administrator explained how being paired with a union leader assisted with the COVID-19 response:

*I have a partner. ... [Union leader] and I met every week. We had Zoom meetings every week to talk about what was going on. ... We helped each other get through it because I needed to hear what our teachers were saying so I knew how to support the principals to get it fixed. .... So we’ve been partners for the past 3 years ... going into this [pandemic], we knew each other and it helped us. We know how to work together.*

Still other leaders reported the value of working together on joint projects as a way to establish stronger ties. This was particularly true in ABCUSD, where labor and district leaders believed these projects helped build trust.

**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. AUSD made consistent efforts to hire leaders and teachers who had grown up in the community as well as to provide professional development and educational opportunities to those who wanted to come back to serve their community. In Alisal, culturally responsive leadership also came from the partner organization Padres Unidos, which reported a commitment to validating parents’ culture and elevating it in their work with the district. One such leader explained:

*To recognize the value you have in your culture is your identity and as you recognize and accept your identity, you are a more powerful person. So the Padres Unidos committee has done a lot of advocacy in that regard with the district. What we want is ... cultural spaces ... where the parent can see themselves as a leader ... where our community has the opportunity to heal and feel empowered.*

In contrast, community leaders in another case study district lamented the lack of culturally relevant leadership and sensitivity to the Black community and believed its absence contributed to a weakened response to COVID-19 and issues of racial injustice.

**Adaptation and learning from prior crises** appeared to inform and strengthen relationships and leaders' ability to respond to the pandemic in two districts. Reflecting on their experience with recent wildfires, a school leader in one district 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. Nevertheless, district leaders were adamant that nothing could have adequately prepared them for the current crisis.

**Building relationships within the central office** was another deliberate practice said to assist leaders in both pandemic response and building relationships. 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 administrator said:

*Because of all that front loading that we did as teamwork and working together allowed us ... Where other districts were flailing about, larger districts trying to figure out what was going on, we were just quietly in the back, just moving forward and getting the job done. Now, I think that was due to the fact that 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.** Perhaps most visible in community–district relations, several of the strongest partnerships resulted from long-standing investments of time and external resources. 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. AUSD's community–district relationships similarly benefited from a long-standing investment from the California Endowment and partnership with community organizers at Padres Unidos. These organizers played a pivotal role in educating and communicating information to parents. In fact, their role in explaining teachers' positions and collective bargaining contrasts with another case study district that lamented the disinformation and misunderstandings about the teachers' union where there was not an intermediary organization to play this role.

External partners played particularly valuable roles in district responses to racial injustice. One district benefited from a statewide social justice organization with expertise in antibias training and conflict mediation. The group provided essential training to staff and students. In another district, nonprofit “thinking partners” hired by the district helped school administrators respond to racial crises. In a third district, a local university provided much-appreciated training related to race, racism, implicit bias, and the Black Lives Matter movement. 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.** As noted throughout this report, local politics clearly strained relationships in several districts, particularly larger ones. The smaller districts with more homogeneous communities, in contrast, presented a local context that may have facilitated stronger relationships. In some cases, we heard that individuals simply knew one another well (“Everybody knows everybody else ... I’ve taught the parents of children”), making it easier to collaborate in times of crisis. In one case study district, the small size of the community was seen as putting pressure on school board members to be responsive. One administrator explained:

*I think from a board perspective, they’re elected officials in our local community, which is a smaller 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.*

Another aspect of context pertained to structural arrangements existing prior to the pandemic. 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:

*We have some intentional structures that allow us to facilitate those relationships. Our board is appointed by board trustee areas. And so I think that speaks volumes to the fact that 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. Often, our board host teas with their community. And they’re still doing some of those teas virtually, but they host community meetings, they also attend city council meetings for the various cities that they are representing as trustee officers.*

Commenting on this structural change, another district leader noted: “It just meant that now, we have representatives who can go into the cities and be a part of the city’s work in order to understand what they are looking for as well from our school district.”

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## Conclusion

In this final section, we reflect on what we learned from our seven districts. First, we examine four high-level findings about relationships and crisis response. We conclude with reflections on the enduring challenges facing public schools and implications for the future.

### Cross-Cutting Reflections on Relationships

In summary, 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 key stakeholders as they unified around their pandemic response and shared priorities of serving the community. Looking across the multiple sets of relationships explored herein, we draw four overarching observations.

**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 pandemic proved otherwise.** Stakeholder groups came together in various ways to help districts with the overwhelming set of challenges they faced. In the case of district leadership, school board members often granted increased authority to superintendents to lead the response and provided help wherever they could. In the case of labor–management and community–district relations, we found deep partnership and joint problem-solving in a few districts as well as other instances of coordination and support. Similarly, COEs went the extra mile to broker communication and resources for many of our case study districts, particularly smaller ones.

**Relationships established prior to the pandemic helped but were not always necessary conditions for the strong relationships observed during the pandemic.** In several cases, the strength of relationships stemmed from a long history of partnership and trust built over time. This was particularly true for some of the districts spotlighted in the report, such as ABCUSD’s labor–management relations and AUSD’s community–district relations. It also played a part in the COE’s work with several small districts that had come to rely on the leadership of this office prior to COVID-19. Yet in a few cases, we were told that relationships that were not particularly strong pre-pandemic evolved and improved during and as a result of the crisis. This was particularly true for labor–management relations in a few of our case study districts as well as the board–superintendent relationship in at least one district.

**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.** In all of the various sets of relationships, leaders played pivotal roles, often drawing upon similar strategies, including proactive and consistent communication, intentional and formal cross-stakeholder relationship-building, culturally responsive leadership, adaptation and learning from prior crises, and relationship building within the central office. Some of the strongest partnerships

also benefited from long-standing investments of time and resources from funders and external partners as well as a smaller homogenous community and structural arrangements facilitating stronger ties (e.g., shift from at-large to trustee board elections).

**Even the best of relationships could not overcome broader challenges outside of education policy.** As noted throughout this report, all districts—including those with strong partnerships and ties with various stakeholder groups—faced insurmountable problems related to exhaustion (true for leaders and employees) and community polarization and politicization of the pandemic (this affected all sets of relationships). Broader infrastructure limitations—in technology and Wi-Fi, health and human services, and housing—further strained districts’ ability to respond to the crises. A pre-COVID-19 statement from the California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities initiative (which funded our case study district Alisal), summed up this latter challenge:

Where you live shouldn’t determine how long you live, but it does. In fact, health has more to do with place than doctors’ visits. The odds are stacked against low-income communities and communities of color. Because of a legacy of racial and economic segregation, anti-immigrant policy and a host of other historical “isms,” there are many communities in California where the neighborhood environment conspires to harm residents. These environments lack basic health protective amenities like parks, grocery stores, decent schools, functioning transportation systems, affordable and decent housing, living wage jobs, and even potable water in some instances. Public systems are on life support, stranding residents in pressure cookers of stress. These neighborhood and community environments are not natural; they are man-made, and can be unmade. (Iton, n.d.)

These broader social issues, with origins dating back long before the pandemic, indicate that the challenges facing districts extended far beyond the school walls. We explore these challenges further in the next section and offer some concluding thoughts on what this all means for the future.

## Reflections on Enduring Challenges and Future 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. 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. Media reports of both teacher shortages and teacher layoffs are mind-boggling to the casual observer but the reality for many California districts.

Researchers are only beginning to document how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced state and local education policy. Evidence from our seven case study districts shows that many California school districts were swept up in debates over pandemic-created issues such as school reopenings, masking mandates, vaccination requirements, and other public health issues. Debates manifested themselves in various ways. For example, as noted in this report, advocates for immediate school openings and the elimination of mask mandates in three of our case study districts demonized teacher unions. Yet in all districts, the evidence shows that school officials and unions worked hard to balance staff and student safety with the challenges of on-site classrooms during the pandemic, even when some community pressures pulled in a different direction.

Superintendents, district administrators, and principals continue to operate under emergency conditions as they try to patch together solutions to address schools' operational challenges and staffing problems each day: teacher, substitute, and classified-staff shortages; high student absenteeism; and COVID-19 quarantines. At the classroom level, students' return to in-person teaching has been difficult and remains so. After 2 years of disrupted learning and, for many, trauma, students continue to struggle academically, emotionally, and behaviorally. Many students exhibit behavioral and emotional problems, a lack of basic classroom skills, and academic losses. Inconsistent instruction, student conflicts, a shortage of teachers and classified staff, and the limitations on learning imposed by virus-related health and safety measures further add to daily difficulties.

As always, the challenges confronting public education statewide and locally are inexorably tied to larger social problems and policies as well as long-standing structural inequities. Increasing poverty, homelessness, and holes in the safety net continue even as the pandemic continues to evolve. Despite the long-delayed attention to racial violence and the effort to elevate the conversation about racism, the backlash against antiracism efforts has increased in some California communities. In California and beyond, we have also seen increasing anti-Asian violence, attacks on civil and voting rights, and efforts to further marginalize the rights of LGBTQ individuals.

As the state and districts relax measures once needed to limit the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic has metaphorically shifted from health and safety debates to debates about broader aspects of public education. Some parent groups are challenging the existing curriculum, the coverage of "sensitive" issues in classrooms, and the professional expertise and authority of educators. So in addition to remaining vigilant in the face of a protracted public health crisis, public education is facing another pandemic engendered by disinformation campaigns, the politicization of local education policy, and the decline of civil public discourse.

Given the preponderance of daily disturbing media reports about the status of public education, it is difficult to avoid despondency. We will try. Without underestimating the problems facing states' public education systems, we believe California is resiliently positioned to emerge from the pandemic and the associated politicization of education issues. Here are a few reasons for our optimism:

- California is a wealthy state and has made decades-long efforts to redistribute education funding to provide more equitable education.
- Recently, the state has dramatically increased overall funding for education after languishing near the bottom of all U.S. states. An important focus of the increase in education funding has been to make early education available to all.
- The proposed 2022–23 state budget brings education funding to a historic high and includes a variety of promising programs: measures to stabilize funding, investments in community schools, increases in the number of new teachers in the pipeline, investments in early literacy, and expanded learning opportunities (before- and afterschool enrichment and academic programs).
- The state is taking steps to address racism in and out of schools—for example, by adopting requirements for an ethnic studies curriculum and initiating a reparations task force. (Whether some of these efforts remain symbolic is yet to be determined.)
- California is mostly a socially progressive state that values public education and generally rejects racism, homophobia, limits on speech, book bans, and the like.

Although these reasons for optimism hold promise, a not insignificant segment of the state’s population still distrusts state government and often their local education leadership. This distrust is manifested in disrupted school board meetings and disinformation campaigns that have led to increasing politicization of education policy decisions and widening polarization in some communities. How have we arrived at this point? To be sure, the seeds of division and discontent predated COVID-19, but the pandemic contributed to more generalized frustration with public education. Our argument, based on data from our case study districts, is that as the pandemic dragged on, early parent support for efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19 gradually eroded in some communities and was replaced by simmering frustration over school closures, distance learning, and other pandemic measures. At the same time, racial reckoning rose higher on the public agenda, and some communities felt threatened by increased public attention to racial injustice. This frustration and fear made some parents susceptible to false claims and conspiratorial theories that already were the foundation of the nation’s political divisions.

Ultimately, confronting false claims and their consequences (e.g., restrictions in what schools can teach) will require more intense and meaningful community engagement and closer partnerships among parents, school districts, and CBOs. Public education is strengthened when communities and educators are partners in service of children. One parent in a case study district told us about her involvement in organizing and advocating: “I found my passion and my mission in life. It wasn’t just helping my children, but other people’s children, too.”

What state policies might better support schools and their communities and advance “helping other people’s children” during this highly polarized time?

- **Stabilize state funding for schools.**
- **Strategically invest in programs and policies** that address 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-emotional learning curriculum. 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 more time, energy, and resources 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 help districts devise tailored local strategies to advance civil community discourse and challenge disinformation.**

Important grassroots efforts to counter disinformation are already underway, some involving California statewide membership organizations. Other statewide education organizations and state-sponsored agencies should look to their lead (van der Lans, 2021). 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 (Alonso et al., 2021).



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## Appendix A: Methods

From March 2020 to May 2021, we studied seven California school districts selected to represent statewide variation in size, geographic location, urbanicity, and grade span (see Table 1 in body of report). 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 state leaders (from major associations, those working with districts statewide) and 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 includes 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 vary 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 case study districts are K–12 unified school districts. In two of the districts, teachers are represented by the California Federation of Teachers (CFT). The California Teachers Association (CTA) is present in the remaining five districts.

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, we recruited districts to participate, and teams of two researchers conducted interviews via videoconferencing/Zoom with COE and public health administrators, district officials, union representatives, school board members, community members, principals, and in some cases, parents. Across the seven districts, researchers conducted a total of 98 interviews and four focus groups, for a total of 105 participants. (see Table A-1), which were all recorded and transcribed. Throughout the process, teams analyzed district communications and plans, including Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs) and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) negotiated during the COVID-19 pandemic between districts and their unions.

**Table A-1.** List of Interviews by Role Group

Respondent type	Number of interviews 2020–21
District superintendent	7
School board member	9
District central office administrator <sup>a</sup>	37
School leader	14
Community partner/advocate <sup>b</sup>	10 individuals + 1 focus group ( <i>n</i> = 13)
Parent/parent focus group	3 parents + 3 focus groups ( <i>n</i> = 11)
Teachers' union	7
Classified employees union	3
County Office of Education administrator <sup>c</sup>	2
County Office of Public Health administrator <sup>c</sup>	2

<sup>a</sup> Central office administrators included those overseeing operations, finance, technology, academics, communications, student support services, family engagement, and human resources.

<sup>b</sup> Community groups included parent/family advocacy organizations, community health and mental health providers, and civic organizations.

<sup>c</sup> County administrators served four of the districts in our sample (i.e., more than one district in the same county).

### Note on Data Regarding Labor–Management Relations

Information about labor–management relations was obtained through interviews with district and local union officials as well as reviews of relevant documents and other available materials. Teachers and other *certificated* employees (counselors, psychologists, social workers, school nurses, librarians, and the like) in five of the study districts are represented for purposes of collective bargaining by a local affiliate of the CTA and in two by the local CFT affiliate. Researchers were able to interview CFT/CTA officials in all seven districts. *Classified* employees in a single district often are represented by multiple unions. For example, paraprofessionals may be in a different “bargaining unit,” covered by a different contract, and represented by a different union than food service workers. Information about labor–management relations regarding classified employees was limited for this study to classified employees represented by the local chapter of the California School Employees Association (CSEA). Researchers were able to interview CSEA officials in only three of the seven study districts.

### Analysis and Reporting

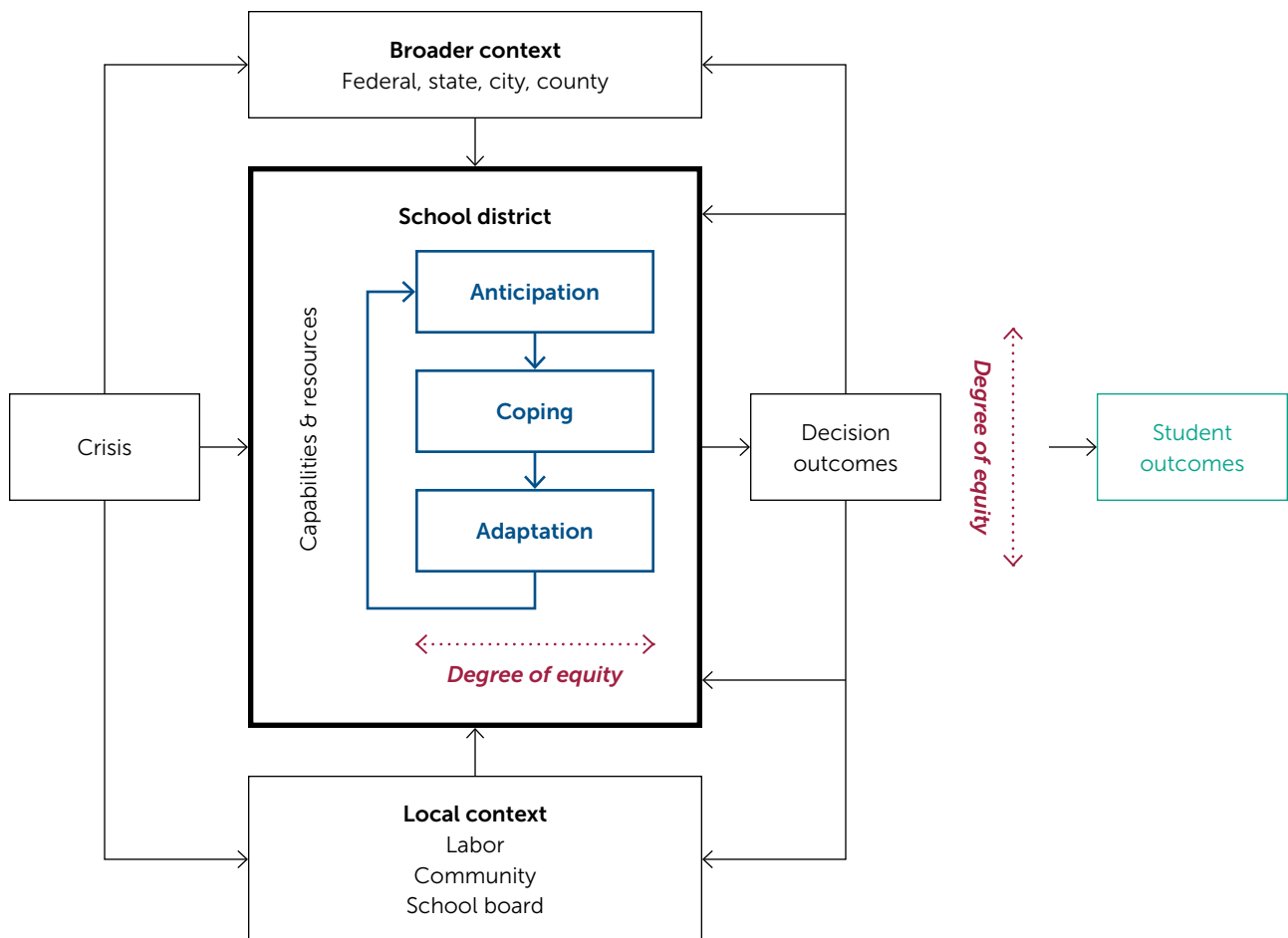
Each team systematically analyzed all interview notes, transcripts, documents, and other data and produced in-depth internal case study writeups. We then conducted cross-case analysis via multiple meetings and memoranda to identify common themes and variation across the sites.

In late 2021, during our analyses, we started to reflect on widely publicized problems facing public schools (e.g., problems related to student mental health and “learning loss,” staffing challenges, politicized school board meetings) and conducted additional internet-based research on each of our case study districts to see what had transpired during the months after the conclusion of our data collection. We stopped this research on February 7, 2022. These articles and stories, along with national media and research, form the basis of “Postscript” sections integrated throughout this report. When relevant, we reflect on the connection between the reported challenges surfaced in the interviews we conducted and these broader crises and updated news accounts.

### Guiding Framework

The following framework (see Figure A-1), based on organizational theory and research, guided our data collection and analysis.

**Figure A-1.** Conceptual Framework on Organizational Response to Crisis



- **Crisis:** We recognized that the COVID-19 crisis is fundamentally different than prior crises, such as wildfires, because of its prolonged nature, politicization, and still-uncertain “end” as well as education leaders’ lack of prior experience with or expertise in handling a global pandemic. During this crisis period, many educational institutions also responded to racism and incidents of racial violence, which both contributed to the severity of the pandemic and highlighted long-standing historical and sociopolitical issues manifest in schools. We expected that much like other crises, the pandemic could result in both disruption and trauma as well as innovation and change.
- **School district:** Drawing on ideas of resilience as a process,<sup>11</sup> we attended to the stages that districts went through when confronting the crisis: (a) *anticipation* (observing and identifying the crisis it developed); (b) *coping* (accepting the crisis and developing immediate solutions); and (c) *adaptation* (reflecting and learning for the future). It was also conceivable that districts might engage in multiple cycles of anticipation, coping, and adaptation as the pandemic evolved. Additionally, we kept in mind that the internal capabilities and resources of districts could enable or constrain their ability to anticipate, cope, and adapt. These include experience and knowledge of staff, funding, the power structure and hierarchy in the district, and its size, culture, routines, and networks.
- **Decision outcomes:** To further unpack crisis response, we examined a set of decisions made in key categories, including the delivery of academic learning at home (closing/reopening schools, distance learning, etc.); technology and access; health and safety (for in-person instruction); social-emotional and mental health supports for students; family supports (including meals and other health or housing supports); supports for teachers and staff; and use of federal crisis funding.<sup>12</sup>
- **Context and stakeholders:** Recognizing that school systems do not exist in a vacuum implied thinking about the external context and relationships with various stakeholders. Prior research suggested that the relationships among labor organizations, community members and parents, and district leaders (school board members and superintendents) would likely contribute to a district’s ability to respond to a collective problem. As such, we designed the study to focus on these three broad groups.

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<sup>11</sup> For a description of the organizational resilience model, which is consistent with prior education research, see Duchek, S. (2020). Organizational resilience: A capability-based conceptualization. *Business Research*, 13: 215–246; for example, Smith, L., & Riley, D. (2012). School leadership in times of crisis. *School Leadership & Management*, 32(1), 57–71, draw on Pearson, C., & Mitroff, I. (1993). From crisis prone to crisis prepared: A framework for crisis management. *Academy of Management Executive*, 7(1), 48–59.

<sup>12</sup> These “decision outcomes” relate to programs, services, and supports that were ultimately implemented, leading to tangible outcomes for students (e.g., health, learning, retention, mental health), which are not a part of our study. We also recognize that these decisions once implemented could influence not only the district but also various actors in the broader environment (as suggested by the arrows in Figure A-1).

Other aspects of the environment (e.g., economic and political conditions) were also examined. Finally, we hypothesized that other levels of government—city, county, state, and federal—could also shape district responses.

- **Equity:** As the project progressed, we adopted a more explicit focus on equity. Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on low-income and BIPOC communities, and following the murder of George Floyd, we paid particular attention to the decisions and actions taken to support BIPOC students, low-income students, and students with special needs (based on language, disability, and housing instability). We also examined how districts responded to calls for racial justice following protests against incidents of racial violence.

As such, the definition of equity guiding our work included more liberal conceptions (i.e., the idea that fair and just treatment of students with greater needs requires the provision of additional resources) along with more transformational ideas that equate equity with challenging forms of oppression, including racism.<sup>13</sup> This latter conception led to a deeper investigation of (a) decision-making processes—namely, who was involved or consulted in the decision-making process (noted as “degree of equity” in process in Figure A-1); and (b) the nature of decision outcomes, particularly deeper changes or innovations occurring (“degree of equity” in decision outcomes).

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of these conceptions, see: Taylor, M., Allbright, T., Marsh, J., Hall, M., Tobben, L. M., Picus, L., & Lavadenz, M. (2019). Conceptualizing equity in the implementation of California education finance reform. *American Journal of Education*, 125(2), 173–200.



## Appendix B: California COVID-19 Education Policies and State Actions

### March 2020 to May 2021

#### March 4, 2020: Declaration of state of emergency

Governor Newsom declared a state of emergency in California “to help prepare for a broader spread of [COVID-19].”<sup>14</sup>

#### March 13, 2020: Executive Order N-26-20 Issued

The governor issued Executive Order N-26-20 to be implemented “in the event schools close as a result of COVID-19.”<sup>15</sup>

The executive order guaranteed uninterrupted state funding for schools through the 2020–21 school year based on “four pillars”:

1. continued high-quality education via distance learning or independent study;
2. school meals provided to students (many districts provided meals to entire families);
3. students supervised during regular school hours “to the extent practicable”; and,
4. continuation of employees’ salaries and benefits and freezing of layoffs.

#### March 13–16, 2020: Schools closed for in-person instruction

Nearly all districts in California closed for in-person instruction.<sup>16</sup>

#### March 17, 2020: Senate Bill 117 signed into law

A companion to the March 13 executive order, Senate Bill 117 was designed to “mitigate the effects of lost attendance due to COVID-19.”<sup>17</sup> The law ensured districts would not lose funding due to COVID-19-related school closures and student absences. All schools were deemed to have met the state-required instructional days and minutes.

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<sup>14</sup> See Newsom, G. (2020, March 4). *Governor Newsom declares state of emergency to help state prepare for broader spread of COVID-19* [Press release]. [gov.ca.gov/2020/03/04/governor-newsom-declares-state-of-emergency-to-help-state-prepare-for-broader-spread-of-covid-19](https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/04/governor-newsom-declares-state-of-emergency-to-help-state-prepare-for-broader-spread-of-covid-19)

<sup>15</sup> See Executive Order No. N-26-20. (2020, March 13). [gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/3.13.20-EO-N-26-20-Schools.pdf](https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/3.13.20-EO-N-26-20-Schools.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> See Cano, R., & Wiener, J. (2020, March 16). *Schools shut down in massive numbers amid California coronavirus fears*. CalMatters. <https://calmatters.org/projects/schools-shut-down-in-massive-numbers-across-california-amid-coronavirus-fears>

<sup>17</sup> For the text of the bill, see S. B. 117 (2019–2020), Chapter 3. [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200SB117](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB117); for an explanation of the bill, see Schulkind, L. (2020, March 18). *California legislature passes SB-117 to provide protections for school districts closed due to COVID-19 and funding for protective equipment and supplies and labor for cleaning school sites*. *LCW Special Bulletin*. <https://www.lcwlegal.com/news/california-legislature-passes-sb-117-to-provide-protections-for-school-districts-closed-due-to-covid-19-and-funding-for-protective-equipment-and-supplies-and-labor-for-cleaning-school-sites>

The law also extended the timeline for annual testing of English learners and special education students and appropriated \$100 million to the Superintendent of Public Instruction to be apportioned to school districts for the purchase of PPE and/or supplies and labor necessary for cleaning schools.

### **March 18, 2020: Standardized testing suspended**

California suspended state standardized testing for all students for the remainder of the school year.<sup>18</sup>

### **April 1, 2020: Framework for labor–management collaboration signed**

This multiparty document, signed by all of the major state education organizations—Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), California School Boards Association (CSBA), California County Superintendents Education Services Administration (CCSESA), California Association of School Business Officials (CASBO), Small School Districts’ Association (SSDA), California Teachers Association (CTA), California Federation of Teachers (CFT), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), California School Employees Association (CSEA), California Labor Federation (CLF), and American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—encouraged labor–management cooperation around COVID-19 issues.

Though not binding, the framework offered guidance to enhance labor–management collaboration, communication, and transparency. Districts and unions committed to keeping students and staff safe, continuing to provide students with meals, and working together “to find the best path for students, employees, and communities.”<sup>19</sup>

### **April 9, 2020: “Do no harm” policies expanded**

Taken together with the March 9 suspension of state standardized testing, California promulgated a set of policies under the “do no harm” umbrella.<sup>20</sup> Enacted out of concern for equity, these policies—including not requiring students to complete additional work beyond what they had finished when school closed for in-person instruction and giving districts the option of replacing letter grades with credit/no credit ratings—were designed to ensure remote instruction would not disadvantage students who had limited access to technology or were living in situations that made remote learning additionally challenging, such as needing to care for siblings as they participated in remote classroom instruction.

<sup>18</sup> See Newson, G. (2020, March 18). *Governor Newsom issues executive order to suspend standardized testing for students in response to COVID-19 outbreak* [Press release]. [gov.ca.gov/2020/03/18/governor-newsom-issues-executive-order-to-suspend-standardized-testing-for-students-in-response-to-covid-19-outbreak](https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/18/governor-newsom-issues-executive-order-to-suspend-standardized-testing-for-students-in-response-to-covid-19-outbreak)

<sup>19</sup> See California Department of Education. (2020). *Framework for Labor–Management Collaboration*. [cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/collaborationframework.asp](https://cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/collaborationframework.asp)

<sup>20</sup> See California Department of Education. (2020). *FAQs on grading and graduation requirements*. [cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/gradgraduationfaq.asp](https://cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/gradgraduationfaq.asp)

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## Late spring/early summer 2020: California Watch List

The governor's office implemented the California Watch List to monitor county-level spread of COVID-19. The state established a set of benchmarks—including elevated disease transmission, increased hospitalization, and decreased hospital capacity—to determine where a county fell on the list. A county that hit a single benchmark was placed on the Watch List with significant restrictions on its business operations. Counties on the Watch List were prohibited from reopening schools for in-person instruction.

### June 8, 2020: State guidance on school reopening issued

The California Department of Education released *Stronger Together: A Guidebook for the Safe Reopening of California's Public Schools*.<sup>21</sup> The product of a statewide reopening-schools task force, the guidebook was designed to “guide local discussion on reopening of schools” in anticipation of possible return to in-person instruction in fall 2020. The state noted that its evolving guidance on reopening schools for in-person instruction would be shaped by advisories from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the California Department of Public Health.

### June 29, 2020: Senate Bill 98 signed into law

A budget trailer bill, Senate Bill 98 (SB 98) replaced the spring's temporary “do no harm” policies, reinstating requirements that were suspended when schools closed for in-person instruction and adding new ones for the 2020–21 school year.<sup>22</sup> The law required that, in addition to ensuring students had access to computers, connectivity, and supports, schools offer live student–teacher interaction with minimum daily instructional minutes (combined live instruction and independent work): 180 minutes for kindergarten, 230 minutes for Grades 1–3, and 240 minutes for Grades 4–12. Districts and unions were authorized to determine the distribution of these minutes as synchronous and asynchronous time.

SB 98 also reinstated student work, grading, and attendance-taking requirements; required that districts track student engagement/attendance using weekly student engagement records; and mandated that students with special needs (students with disabilities, English learners, and youth in foster care or experiencing homelessness) receive necessary support services.

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<sup>21</sup> See California Department of Education. (2020, June). *Stronger together: A guidebook for the safe reopening of California's public schools*. [cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/documents/strongertogether.pdf](https://cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/documents/strongertogether.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> For the text of the bill, see SB 98. (2019–2020), Chapter 24. [leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200SB98](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB98)

In addition, the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) was suspended and replaced with the Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan (LCP) for the 2020–21 school year. The new LCP was designed to include plans to address learning loss when in-person instruction resumed, including students' social-emotional needs, strategies for districts to reconnect with parents, and plans to continue to provide free and reduced-price meals.

### **July 17, 2020: Schools with rising COVID-19 infections ordered to close**

The governor announced that all K–12 schools in counties with rising COVID-19 infections, including those that had opened for in-person instruction, would be required to teach remotely.<sup>23</sup>

### **August 28, 2020: Blueprint for a Safer Economy**

The governor unveiled his Blueprint for a Safer Economy,<sup>24</sup> a system that replaced the Watch List with color-coded tiers. Counties were divided into four tiers based on their rate of COVID-19 infection: Tier 1 (purple) indicated the virus was widespread in the county; Tier 2 (red) that there was substantial spread; Tier 3 (orange), moderate spread; and Tier 4 (yellow), minimal spread. Tiers were intended to guide counties' reopening activities. Schools in counties in the purple tier were prohibited from reopening for in-person instruction.

### **December 30, 2020: Safe Schools for All plan announced**

The governor outlined a framework to continue and expand safe in-person instruction in early spring, including a \$2 billion early action proposal to support school safety measures.<sup>25</sup>

### **February 2021: Priority of vaccinations for school teachers and employees**

The California Department of Public Health released a plan prioritizing vaccines for teachers and other school employees. The plan included a formula that prioritized districts with high percentages of low-income students, English learners, and youth in foster care, along with those that had been hit especially hard by COVID-19.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See Newsom, G. (2020, July 17.) *Governor Gavin Newsom lays out pandemic plan for learning and safe schools* [Press release]. [gov.ca.gov/2020/07/17/governor-gavin-newsom-lays-out-pandemic-plan-for-learning-and-safe-schools](https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/07/17/governor-gavin-newsom-lays-out-pandemic-plan-for-learning-and-safe-schools)

<sup>24</sup> See Newsom, G. (2020, August 28). *Governor Newsom unveils Blueprint for a Safer Economy, a statewide, stringent, and slow plan for living with COVID-19* [Press release]. [gov.ca.gov/2020/08/28/governor-newsom-unveils-blueprint-for-a-safer-economy-a-statewide-stringent-and-slow-plan-for-living-with-covid-19](https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/08/28/governor-newsom-unveils-blueprint-for-a-safer-economy-a-statewide-stringent-and-slow-plan-for-living-with-covid-19)

<sup>25</sup> See California Department of Public Health. (2020, December 30). *Summary for California Safe Schools for All plan*. [cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/Safe-Schools-for-All-Plan-Summary.aspx](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/Safe-Schools-for-All-Plan-Summary.aspx)

<sup>26</sup> See Johnson, S. (2021, February 25). *California sets priorities for vaccination of teachers and school employees*. EdSource. [edsources.org/2021/california-sets-priorities-for-vaccination-of-teachers-and-school-employees/650079#:~:text=The%20plan%20released%20by%20the,school%20staff%20beginning%20March%20](https://edsources.org/2021/california-sets-priorities-for-vaccination-of-teachers-and-school-employees/650079#:~:text=The%20plan%20released%20by%20the,school%20staff%20beginning%20March%20)

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### **March 4, 2021: Assembly Bill 86**

The passage of Assembly Bill 86 provided \$6.6 billion in COVID-19 relief funding for districts, including \$2 billion to encourage districts that had not yet done so to offer in-person instruction beginning April 1, 2021, and \$4.6 billion for expanded learning opportunities.<sup>27</sup>

### **Major California COVID-19 Education Policies and State Actions: July 2021 to February 2022**

#### **July 15, 2021: Assembly Bill 130 signed into law**

Assembly Bill 130 required all school districts and COEs to offer independent study as an educational option for the 2021–22 school year. This 1-year expansion of the state’s pre-COVID-19 independent study law required that school districts submit a plan to the state for making independent study available to “students whose health would be put at risk by in-person instruction, as determined by their parent or guardian.”<sup>28</sup> This law, in effect, substituted independent study for previous distance learning arrangements.

#### **August 11, 2021: Required COVID-19 vaccination for school staff**

California announced that by October 15, 2021, all school staff needed to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination or be tested weekly.<sup>29</sup>

#### **October 1, 2021: Required COVID-19 vaccination for students**

All eligible students 12 years and older would be required to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination, with the mandate shifting as younger children became eligible for COVID-19 vaccinations.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See California Department of Education. (2021). *COVID-19 relief and school reopening grants*. [cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/covidreliefgrants.asp](https://cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/covidreliefgrants.asp)

<sup>28</sup> See California Department of Education. (2021, July 15). *Changes to independent study requirements*. [cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/is/changesisab130.asp](https://cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/is/changesisab130.asp)

<sup>29</sup> See Newsom, G. (2021, August 11). *California implements first-in-the-nation measure to encourage teachers and school staff to get vaccinated* [Press release]. [gov.ca.gov/2021/08/11/california-implements-first-in-the-nation-measure-to-encourage-teachers-and-school-staff-to-get-vaccinated](https://gov.ca.gov/2021/08/11/california-implements-first-in-the-nation-measure-to-encourage-teachers-and-school-staff-to-get-vaccinated)

<sup>30</sup> See Newsom, G. (2021, October 1). *California becomes first state in the nation to announce COVID-19 vaccine requirements for schools* [Press release]. [gov.ca.gov/2021/10/01/california-becomes-first-state-in-nation-to-announce-covid-19-vaccine-requirements-for-schools](https://gov.ca.gov/2021/10/01/california-becomes-first-state-in-nation-to-announce-covid-19-vaccine-requirements-for-schools)

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## Author Biographies

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