

Teaching in the Time of COVID-19: Shining a light on Community Schools

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As schools across the district, state and nation close to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus, teachers are working diligently to ensure their students and families continue to feel connected to their school communities. In times of crisis, the safe space, stability, and the meaningful and caring relationships schools provide are more important than ever, especially for our most vulnerable youth—those who experience food and income insecurities. As teachers and participants of [UCLA's Consortium of Community Schools](#), we share how relationships are at the center of our teaching and learning practices, and how we are working harder and more creatively than ever to let our students and families know that we are here for them.

Darlene Tieu:

At Mann UCLA Community School, for example, as we received word that schools would be closing, a quick survey of my students revealed that more than half lacked access to a device and/or the internet at home. This information encouraged us to think creatively about how to remain connected to our students. Teachers divided phone lists and conducted check-ins that focused on assignments, information sharing, and students' well-being. In a matter of days, every teacher also established an Instagram account that enabled direct one-on-one messaging with students. My students have messaged me for a range of reasons: "what if I have asthma?" "I need help on an assignment," and just to say "I miss school." We are also using Instagram, and other platforms, to remain connected to each other. With a large population of students with special needs and many parents who are unable to provide the technological or academic assistance their middle and high schooler students need, we are working together to design ways to provide individualized supports.

Roberto Vega:

At Social Justice Humanitas Academy, we have leveraged our relationships and the trust we have established with students and parents to remind families that our school is more than a place where students take classes but a community resource—even with doors closed. In advance of the closure, we surveyed all students to inquire about their need for meals, access to internet services at home, and if they had concerns about being home if/when the school shut its doors. We have continued to meet, virtually, through staff meetings, and instructional and grade level teams to develop strategies for the 27% of students who indicated they had no

service or relied exclusively on their phone for connectivity at home (most of whom are recent immigrants). Using shared online documents, we are confirming that every student has connected with at least one teacher. Established practices, such as after school office hours and peer-to-peer mentorships have been critical in helping students navigate a new social and academic environment. Through regularly scheduled office hours, now held via a range of platforms, students are able to connect with us to discuss any issue on their mind. As the senior teacher and coordinator of the school's mentorship program, I have been able to provide guidance to my senior mentors as they continue to work with their younger mentees through phone check-ins to ensure their academic, social and emotional well-being. We are certain that these immediate efforts to show care can make a difference.

Rosa Jimenez:

At the UCLA Community School, we have prioritized communication with families. Using a range of strategies—the school's website, internet postings, phone calls—we view our primary role as a conduit of information at this point in time. As a grab-and-go center, we are able to use morning meal distributions as one more opportunity to check in on families and disseminate critical information and provide resources. Serving a largely immigrant community, we are urgently ensuring that families in need of assistance on immigration matters, applying for government benefits and/or finding resources, or have information regarding US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, know that RFK's Immigrant Family Legal Clinic and other organizations are available to help during this crisis. This crisis is shining a light on how we see ourselves and our role—as balancing the synergistic goals of health and well-being, and academic learning.

Lorenza Yarnes:

At Leo Politi Elementary, teachers have contacted every student and family in their class since the school closure. In hearing my voice, I can hear parents' relief. Teachers are the connective glue at the school and I don't want to lose this connection. We are also making efforts to retain the community we have established among the staff. Using a system of communication that was put in place during last year's strike, we are in constant contact with each other. We have a place to share information, laugh and vent—an important life line while we practice physical distancing.

These stories shine a light on how communities must continue to work together to get through this--ensuring our most vulnerable students do not get lost along the way. On March 23^d Superintendent Beutner reminded us that "at the center of the community is the neighborhood public school." We must keep this in mind now and well beyond this crisis.