

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN CITIES:

Ensuring That All Children and Youth Have High-Quality Opportunities to Learn and Grow

The COVID-19 pandemic has already had a devastating impact on children and youth; one of the greatest threats to their current and future well-being is the loss of opportunities to learn and grow. Municipal leaders can respond to this crisis by working with school districts and community partners to ensure that all children and youth in cities, towns and villages have uninterrupted access to education and supports for learning. Immediate action is essential in growing numbers of communities as the virus spreads and schools are in various states of closure. The following steps will help local leaders ensure that young people can stay on track to a healthy and fulfilling future during this crisis.

1 Engage community organizations and afterschool programs to provide the supports children and youth need for learning and development.

Widespread school closures and an unprecedented disruption to K-12 schooling have affected more than 55 million students nationwide. With schools in varied stages of in-person, online and hybrid learning, local leaders have an obligation to partner with school districts and community-based organizations to ensure that students and families are supported through these unprecedented times.

City leaders can begin by working closely with community partners, including afterschool programs, to support schools, parents and students. Among the priorities for these partnerships: ensuring that all students are connected and engaged in school, have access to Wi-Fi and technology for remote learning, and have their unmet needs addressed.

The **City of New Haven's** [Community Learning Hubs provide safe spaces for children and youth to be connected and learning during a remote school year.](#)

Wraparound supports for vulnerable students and families are especially important during the COVID-19 crisis, which has had a disproportionate effect on low-income families and communities of color. Cities and their partners can make sure these families are connected to vital services to meet basic needs in areas such as housing, healthcare and food. Cities and their partners also should consider supporting the implementation of a [Community Learning Hub](#) model, which will help ensure that youth and families have access to what they need to successfully participate in virtual learning.

Local leaders also can quickly conduct an inventory of available city buildings or outdoor venues that may be repurposed to support virtual learning and afterschool and enrichment programs for students. In the [City of Vancouver, WA, Vancouver Parks and Recreation](#) is working with local school districts to support distance learning by using their facilities to provide supervised day camps in safe settings.

As an additional resource, [NLC's Student Reengagement Amid COVID-19](#) resource outlines a set of emerging strategies, tools, and frameworks to consider when reconnecting and reengaging with youth in the time of COVID-19.

2 Work with partners to increase internet access and digital literacy for online learners and their families.

COVID-19 has laid bare the gaps that exist among different households when it comes to broadband access and technology. With so many schools going partially or fully online, huge numbers of children are disadvantaged because of a lack of internet service or because the family does not have a computer. The Pew Research Center has estimated that nearly a third of students nationally were forced to attempt to complete schoolwork on a cell phone this spring, and nearly a quarter lacked in-home broadband to connect with school. While many communities and school districts have set out to secure access to loaner laptops and mobile hotspots for students and families, these solutions often are temporary band-aids with serious shortcomings, such as quickly exceeded data caps.

Local leaders can work with community organizations, school districts, and partners such as universities to assess

Some internet service providers (ISPs) allow communities, school districts, or nonprofit organizations to bulk-purchase broadband subscriptions for large numbers of households so that residents can access the [internet](#) for free. For example, Comcast's Internet Essentials Partnership Program allows for bulk purchase of low-cost service for eligible households in a community.

on a block-by-block level the number of households without broadband access, and if possible, the reasons those residents are not connected. This assessment should be the first step in a larger, longer-term digital equity plan. For example, in the [City of Chattanooga, TN, a multi-jurisdictional partnership](#) is working to ensure that local students have internet access for learning.

Connectivity solutions must fit the communities for which they are intended. City leaders can consult with residents and local organizations to determine what solutions are most effective and achievable. In some cases, this may mean partnering with local internet service providers to negotiate bulk purchases of broadband subscriptions for students or discounted service for residents in need. In other cases, it may mean building on and expanding existing networks to broaden their reach into specific neighborhoods or housing developments, or even exploring a long-term investment in a public broadband utility. Leaders should keep in mind that residents and families will need technology support and training to use new devices and internet connections effectively and safely.

3 Ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities for all children and youth in your community.

School closures nationwide are revealing longstanding and profound inequities when it comes to the conditions and resources that support learning. The ability of children and youth to thrive depends on their access to healthy food, mental health services, health care, computers/internet and afterschool programs, among other critical supports that schools often provide. While many community and faith-based organizations have stepped up to provide these and other supports to children, youth, and families during the crisis, additional coordination and support are needed, especially as children remain out of school.

Local leaders can organize citywide efforts to identify the immediate needs of children, youth, and families through the collection of disaggregated data and assessments that document inequities. Leaders can enhance their understanding of community challenges through authentic engagement of youth and families as stakeholders and decision-makers. Using this data and information, cities

[Staff of the Washington, DC Reengagement Center](#) began providing case management services by phone at the outset of the pandemic. Staff widely shared resources, including information about emergency changes to public benefits, with clients and other youth-serving programs across the city.

can serve as conveners to assess the resources and capacity of community partners to meet the needs of children, youth and their families. A key to this planning work is using shared data dashboards and other tools to focus on the highest-need neighborhoods, age groups and populations to ensure that they become a priority for ramped-up supports. The ultimate goal should be to create an equitable continuum of care for children and youth across the city during this difficult time.

City leaders can also play a significant role in supporting youth and young adults to reengage in positive educational pathways, whether they lost contact with school primarily due to the pandemic or for other reasons. In the [City of Baltimore, MD, Baltimore City Public Schools' Reengagement Center](#) has led the citywide working group tasked with engaging the 15 percent of public school students with whom the district has had no contact since the beginning of the public health crisis. The Reengagement Center serves as a “command center” — each day, staff from four contracted, community-based organizations check in with a nurse and reengagement staff before conducting in-person wellness and resource connection checks across the city.

4 Consider partnering with local businesses and community organizations to increase access to internships and service opportunities for youth and young adults.

Cities, towns, and villages across the country are facing the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression. Unemployment rates are still at historically high levels in many communities, with the number of out-of-work, out-of-school, 16- to 24-year-olds [skyrocketing](#). Against this backdrop, city leaders are uniquely positioned to help young people gain skills and valuable workplace and career experiences through internship and service opportunities. An added benefit is that marshaling city, state and federal funds to support youth and young adult training and reengagement efforts can help drive local economic recovery.

City leaders can jumpstart this process by designating a senior staff person to develop and implement a citywide strategy to increase employment and training opportunities for young adults. It is also not too early to begin planning for summer 2021 youth employment initiatives.

[The City-Corps Partnership Guide](#) can help local leaders develop workforce readiness and service-learning opportunities focused on climate change and resilience.

In less than 90 days, the [City of Charlotte, N.C.](#) Mayor's Youth Employment Program (MYEP) developed virtual pathways for youth at risk of losing workforce opportunities and relationships with caring adults in summer 2020. MYEP mobilized city agencies, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Career and Technical Education department, community-based partners, and local businesses to offer internship and employment opportunities in coordination with leading employers.

Finally, cities should consider creative ways to create service-learning programs within the community. In the wake of continued climate change, the [City of Phoenix, AZ](#) is launching several efforts to make the city "heat ready." As part of this work, city agencies and community partners are coming together to create service-learning opportunities that provide both skills training and career exploration for young adults.

5 Address the challenges and concerns of postsecondary learners in your community.

In the midst of this crisis, city leaders should continue to play a key role in communicating the importance of postsecondary education to their city's long-term economic resilience and vitality. As of [September 2020](#), individuals with a high-school diploma or less had an unemployment rate of 19.6 percent, compared to just 4.8 percent for bachelor's degree holders. However, postsecondary students are facing significant challenges as a result of COVID-19, with recent surveys indicating that more than one-third of postsecondary students have lost a job due to the pandemic and nearly [three in five](#) postsecondary students are facing unmet basic needs, including homelessness, food insecurity, lack of access to child care, and more. Unmet basic needs often derail students' efforts to attain postsecondary credentials, which undermines their ability to succeed in the workforce.

To craft a comprehensive and effective response, city leaders can convene local postsecondary institutions, employers, and other community partners to share and aggregate data on student needs and experiences, identify barriers, and coordinate responses to help ensure students remain connected to postsecondary education and their basic needs are being met. Key steps also include collaboration with state unemployment insurance systems and federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to help students receive key benefits for which they are eligible.

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