



SECURING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY: Learning from the Lived Experiences of Black, Latino, and Low-Income Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has unearthed and exacerbated long-standing educational disparities for underserved Black, Latino, and low-income students in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland. However, the pandemic – and all of the systemic efforts to transform how and where students learn – offers a **unique and urgent opportunity to address these disparities, during the pandemic and beyond.**

Effective solutions during this period of online education, and beyond, require the inclusion of voices that are often not heard in MCPS dialogues. Structural changes are urgently needed to prevent the disengagement of students who are falling further behind, and to respond to the challenges they face with support rather than dismissal. Such changes must come from a more culturally sensitive and comprehensive **understanding of the lived experiences of families** who face greater burdens in health, housing insecurity, technological access, and work demands.

In order to give voice to the perspectives of underserved Black, Latino, and low-income students and families, a team of researchers from University of Maryland, College Park, worked with the Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence to interview 52 MCPS students, parents, educators, and staff members in July and August 2020. This report outlines **three sets of key findings** from these interviews:

KEY FINDINGS ► **Adult Support**

Students want and need more from the adults in the system. MCPS must redeploy a range of school personnel, in addition to teachers, to provide frequent, consistent, and personalized support to students who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement. Students need greater access to teachers or tutors for academic assistance, and counselors for mental health support. Recommendations include outdoor homework help sessions, phone hotlines, and designated personnel at each school to track and engage students and parents in ways that acknowledge and support their challenges rather than punish them.

KEY FINDINGS ► **Communication**

Disengagement resulting from heightened isolation increases the need for effective communication. Communication from MCPS, schools, and teachers must be more frequent and consistent, must provide clear expectations, and must be more accessible to all students and families, regardless of language spoken or level of

technological proficiency. Multiple forms of communication – email, text, postal mail, phone calls – should be used frequently, to ensure that all families are informed. Recommendations include designating at least one person at each school who will be available and responsive by phone when questions and concerns arise. Latino parents who are not proficient in English and/or not familiar with our system of education especially need communication that is in Spanish, is non-electronic, and can educate them about online learning and how to access and use technology.

KEY FINDINGS ► Resources

Being available to learn during this crisis and beyond depends upon specific needs being met. Most underserved Black and Latino students reported that they do not have a private space, or a desk, for quiet work. Students and parents struggle with stable internet connectivity and reliable devices. They need an accessible phone hotline for on-demand or real-time technological support, opportunities to replace broken Chromebooks, and technology training. Distribution of meals, books and supplies and other resources need to be more accessible to families, including outside of work hours. Finally, students and parents strongly expressed the need for culturally informed and accessible mental health support to cope with the stress of COVID-19 and other ongoing stressors.

The urgent changes outlined in this report will help underserved students to be engaged and successful during online learning. However, even after the pandemic subsides, some Black and Latino families will still face disproportionate rates of ongoing trauma, and students will still return home to significant stressors. Therefore, the ultimate goal is for MCPS to create structural change that reduces disparities during the pandemic, and after schools return to in-person instruction.

INTRODUCTION

SECURING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY: Learning from the Lived Experiences of Black, Latino, and Low-Income Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly changed the ways that all students and families engage with education, and has placed new and difficult demands on everyone. However, the transition to online learning has created greater burdens for underserved Black, Latino, and low-income students whose families are more directly impacted by both the health and economic crisis of the pandemic.

These students, without adequate support, are more likely to disengage from school and to fall further behind their peers academically. This would widen the educational disparities that were already evident in Montgomery County prior to the pandemic, but which are worsening during this period of online learning. Underserved students will continue to face trauma, housing and food insecurities, and additional stressors in their home lives even after schools return to in-person instruction. Therefore, the efforts at educational recovery described in this report must extend well beyond the pandemic to reduce disparities by creating lasting systemic changes.

Underserved Black, Latino, and low-income students and their families have not traditionally been effectively engaged to contribute feedback to MCPS. We therefore have limited understanding of their experiences and needs, even prior to the pandemic. This study was conducted in order to give voice to their perspectives, so that they can be incorporated into MCPS' ongoing planning and decision making during this unprecedented time, and into the future.

We conducted extensive interviews over the summer with 13 Black and Latino MCPS educators, 2 community staff members who provide GED services, 15 Black and Latino students in two focus groups (one group of Black students in English, one group of Latino students in Spanish), and 16 Black and Latino parents in two focus groups (one group of Black parents in English and one group of Latino parents in Spanish) and 6 individual interviews (Black parents interviewed in English and Latino parents interviewed in Spanish). Although the study asked about experiences during spring and summer of 2020, the findings remain relevant to current conditions.

Understanding the Experiences of Underserved Black & Latino Students in 2020

The shift from education in school to at home was not smooth for any family, yet underserved Black and Latino children experienced the new weight of additional responsibilities to help their parents manage family needs. For example, one student described negotiating the competing demands of schoolwork and caring for her household:

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What I'm most worried about is knowing how to manage my time... to have time for the things I have to do at home and also for my online classes. When I went to school, I had my schedule: I woke up at 6, got ready and left for school early. I didn't get calls from parents or anything like that. Now that we're home, my parents call me, "Did you make food? Did you clean up?" If I'm in a meeting, I get interrupted. Sometimes they send me to the store to buy something when we have meetings. I have to obey them, I have to put the family first, you know what I mean?

Another student noted that real problems emerged when she juggled dealing with household maintenance, job threats, and the reality of the virus:

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The thing for me was that my mom got sick with the virus and my brother got sick with flu. Both of them were weak and I was the only one who was well, so I had to take care of them. I was in virtual classes and I couldn't take care of my mom, she told me to do everything normally. I also had to take calls from my worried relatives. At that time I was also scared and depressed, my mom was also depressed because she was being told not to go to work anymore. Things also happened with the house because of the rain, things with the economy. Well, it's still happening. We're getting ahead of it, but a lot has happened.

Even as some students stood up to these new challenges, some suffered from lack of adequate support from adults while struggling with enormous insecurities. Their motivation declined and they grew detached from the consequences of staying engaged with school. One student described watching his friends migrate away from showing up for online class, opting to work instead:

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I have so many friends who say, “Nah, I’m not doing any more work. It’s online, they can’t make me do it, so why should I do it?” I mean, I don’t get that type of mind process, but I’m not gonna sit here and tell these people that they need to do their work. One of my friends has a job, so he said, “I’m making money right now, so right now I’m gonna be fine.” He has this job at McDonald’s right now, but how’s that really gonna help him in ten years? Come on now. He says, “I’m gonna get my GED.” It’s not the same. It’s not the same.

Both students and parents acknowledged the high levels of stress that the pandemic and related job, household, and school changes brought into their relationships. In many households, students had little to no privacy. A student recognized that “we need more family time and space, but I don’t have it sometimes. I feel sorry for my mother..., but she gets angry and thinks I have time for one thing and not others.”

In contrast, parents realize the pressure that is being placed on their children. One said, “I need my daughters’ help, or we are not going to make it.” Another mother returned to work and worried about her children’s ability to care for themselves:

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Now I am going to start working and they are going to be alone. They are going to be happy because they are not going to have me there yelling at them all the time, with love, but making them feel the pressure and the commitment they have. So, I’m worried that I’m not going to be that close to them. It’s going to be hard for them to push themselves. I am more concerned about the young children who will stay home while their parents go to work.

Parents struggled to balance responsibility for their children’s progress in school with daunting challenges of managing jobs and caring for multiple young children, often with very problematic technology, lack of access to consistent food supply, limited transportation options, and sometimes as single parents. “Parents need the support of having somebody else being the one to help their child,” argued one parent, “because parents are stretched too thin to be able to do all the helping that is needed [for students].”

An educator shared that, “I think a lot of teachers, they really struggle to understand where their students are coming from.” Multiple educators noted that many of their coworkers did not live in the same neighborhood with their students, did not speak the same language, or appreciate the everyday challenges that they faced. These coworkers were not equipped to reach out to reconnect with their students after the shift to online learning, in large part because they could not imagine the family households that had now become their students’ classrooms.

Within these contexts, this study seeks to describe the experiences and needs of underserved Black and Latino students and families, to increase awareness and sensitivity to the challenges that they may be facing at home, and to recommend strategies for reducing the educational disparities faced by these students. In synthesizing and analyzing the data from this study, three specific themes were identified.

THEME 1: Adult Support

Most student disengagement was grounded in a lack of adequately engaged adult interaction to support online learning. Under optimal circumstances, students have parents and teachers involved in their lives on a daily basis. But in the pandemic, the structures for providing this kind of regular engagement were eliminated or significantly reduced. One parent worried, “Our kids are more alone than ever. The school doesn’t help, and the parents are at work. Honestly, I don’t know if there is a way to help them.”

At school, many students reported feeling connected, cared for, and supported by teachers. “The teachers push you,” a student described, “They are like that second set of family. Like, the Wellness Centers - I swear, that is my family right there. Whenever I go in there, they ask if I’ve done my work, and they make me leave if I haven’t. So they drive me.” During the pandemic, some teachers and schools have not maintained those social-emotional connections and students are struggling without them. As this student reflected, he realized that “this is really what’s messing me up...it’s going to be really hard because when people went to school, there was always that one teacher you have - when they tell you to do something, you’re going to do it. When you don’t have that at home, it’s going to be super hard.”

From a young person’s perspective, the lack of adult interaction to support learning during the day can feel liberating at first, but it became clear how much they miss and need adults to structure their responsibilities and to motivate them. A student entering his senior year of high school described “a few friends that have parents that work every single day, and they just don’t have somebody to push them, to be on top of them. When you’re in school, you have your teachers to help you out. But a lot of kids are just at home alone, without parents to motivate them to do it...that’s a struggle.” He acknowledged that his friends, who were on track to attend college may disengage during the shift to online education and lose the opportunity to earn a college degree.

What is apparent to students is that, without adequate adult presence, their engagement with school was truly in their control. Students noted how easy it was to skip class. “You just don’t even have to go now,” said one student. “It’s not even like you’re skipping class, that you’ll be in the hallways and security can take you to class. No. You’re gonna take a nap when you’re supposed to take that class.” Another student, also a senior in high school, shared:

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At school, you don’t have many chances to just sit there and not do your work. Most teachers make it pretty hard for you not to just sit there and do nothing. But in online school they don’t have as much control over the situation. They can’t force someone to get on Zoom and finish their assignments. You control your attitude and your effort, and what you want for yourself.

Sometimes, the solutions that schools offered to connect with students could be problematic themselves. The Zoom classroom, although it could provide a very interactive environment in some respects, was alienating in others. Several students mentioned that they felt embarrassed about having their homes exposed to all of their classmates and teachers, when they were expected to turn their cameras on. They stressed that turning their camera off was not a sign of disengagement, but more often a marker of discomfort, frustration, and isolation. In addition, Zoom makes it more difficult for teachers to pick up on body language and draw out students who

are more reserved, thus making it less likely that teachers will connect with students who are more shy, reserved, struggling or insecure.

To further illustrate the importance of connection to adults at school and home, an ESOL teacher talked at length about the students facing possibly some of the most difficult barriers to education: undocumented, unaccompanied immigrant youth. As she described:

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There are students who really struggled with communicating with the teachers. I had one boy, he told us that he didn't want to continue school. He had gone through a lot of trauma coming from his home country, and he was like "I'm just – I'm done. I can't do this." He didn't have a family support system, he didn't live with his parents. The people he lived with, he was not 100 percent comfortable with them. So I would just talk to him nicely, try to get him to talk. He did pretty well in my class... but it was just hard for him. He struggled with learning English, and that made him feel...less than. But maybe if more of us really try to talk to them, they would do better.

Although this student may have been at the extreme of living without adequate adult engagement, some of the older Black and Latino students were commonly expected to find their way through a confusing education system, and then to navigate college applications, scholarship applications, or job applications with limited adult guidance.

Some home instruction/GED students were dropped from MCPS schools during the pandemic transition. They felt “pushed out” by counselors; even when they were motivated to pursue their diplomas, these older Latino students were not provided with information on options or, in some cases, discouraged from continuing with high school. Such punitive responses to struggles with school engagement stood in stark contrast to more supportive responses that counselors might provide to underserved students, such as asking, “How can we help you? What are you dealing with that pulls you away from school?”

Parents uniformly described wanting to help children with schoolwork, but many felt ill equipped to provide the guidance that students need. A Black mother was frustrated with her inability to even offer assistance in early level math:

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When my daughter would come to me when she was in second grade, she was coming to me with new math. And I'm teaching her. And she says, "No, mommy. This is not how Miss R taught us." And I'm like, "Okay, well, how did they teach you?" So, she's showing me. But they teach them differently.... So, it was harder, and it was a little bit frustrating because I couldn't really sit down with them and help them with their work like I wanted to.

Having available parents who can help with schoolwork was not the situation for many underserved Black and Latino students whose parents are essential workers, or who need to work outside of the household throughout the pandemic. With no adults in their education setting, students were asked to carry the weight of multiple obligations, even as young adolescents. A Latina parent described:

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And then you have parents who have to work, and the middle school child has to take care of two elementary school kids. The child has to help them to log in, and when the youngest ones no longer want to be there, it's a big problem because the oldest child also has to be in his class at the same time. They're living through something very sad in terms of the parents not being able to be with the kids. This middle schooler - a 12- or 13-year-old - isn't able to do all the work that has to be done. That's going to be complicated.

Without regular interaction with teachers and parents, students were often left alone to solve looming, persistent challenges – ranging from keeping siblings safe to making food, from applying to college to entering the job market. Interaction with adults was grounded in related needs: for mentoring and guidance with school material, and for socioemotional connection. Lack of adult interaction regarding academics often led to frustration, isolation, and lack of motivation, and most youth keenly felt exposed and alone, without adult support to keep them attached to school.

THEME 2: Communication

Students and parents felt very alone in trying to figure out expectations, requirements, and technology. They were unanimous in asking for more frequent and more effective communication from MCPS, and from teachers and counselors.

Communication with Students

Students talked about how a lack of clearly communicated expectations about things like attendance and how to do assignments left them chronically frustrated. This frustration led to decreased motivation, and ultimately to giving up and disengaging. They want more individualized communication from teachers about assignments and schedules. Latino students especially described feeling lost and unable to talk with teachers to get the help that they needed:

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Well, my experience communicating with my teachers was kind of bad because some of them were too fast, they said the zoom meeting lasted just one hour and they have to explain everything, it was so fast and we can't ask a question. When I wanted to ask any specific question, I sent them an email and they didn't answer, or they did it late. So, I got used to not asking questions anymore because I feel they won't be answered.

This student clearly articulated a common negative cycle of frustration leading to disengagement. Students with more limited English skills were particularly lost and in need of additional assistance. Their parents described that they did not understand class material or assignments, but they would be too intimidated or overwhelmed to ask for help, and would instead just not complete the work. Although this cycle was more prominent for Latino students and students who didn't have any adult help at home, the need for time to get individual help and attention from teachers, more frequently than once a week, was expressed by all students.

Students also described multiple experiences of not receiving answers when they emailed teachers. This lack of responsiveness led to frustration, helplessness, and disengagement.

One student stated, “I understand there are a lot of people in the class, but I think teachers need to have a technique to answer everyone; I also have sent emails and I did not get a response, even when I have to deliver that work next day. So, I think communication between teachers and students could get better.” Students want teachers to have standardized requirements for responding to student emails in a timely manner, and to have those standards clearly communicated to teachers, parents, and students.

Students were also clear in needing communication that is both more personal, and especially more **proactive**. Several students described feeling embarrassed or reluctant to reach out to teachers or counselors for help, and also expressed the desire for teachers and counselors to contact them, to check on them and see what they need. One Black student suggested:

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I was thinking maybe a teacher showing a student that they're hearing them.... Just reach out to them. Maybe shoot them an email, ask them how they're doing under all this. Just show that you actually care for what they're going through and how they are. It might not be much, but it definitely makes us feel like this teacher's looking out for me, and she's got my back. And it makes me wanna come on forward and talk to that teacher more if I have any problems about something because I know that she cares about what's going on with me.

Many other students echoed this suggestion. Another said, “There's no hurt in texting, emailing, everybody.... Like, there were so many times that my history teacher, he would just send us pictures of his dog. I don't even like dogs, but it was just tough for us. It's literally the little things.” Such proactive outreach and expressions of caring are needed in order to be inclusive of those students who are afraid or unable to initiate contact and ask for help.

Communication with Parents

Parents consistently expressed the need for more frequent and more accessible communication from teachers, schools, and MCPS. Both Black and Latino parents were frustrated by not receiving clear and consistent messages about what to expect in terms of schedules, assignments, and requirements for their students. As one parent stated, “it would be good if they speak more to the parents about what they expect from children no matter the age, so we can guide them, along with the teachers.”

Parents felt that communication of this sort was absent, or that they were receiving mixed and conflicting messages. Parents asked for help learning how to use the various electronic platforms so that they can assist younger students and supervise older students. However, many of them felt that accessing the parent platforms was extremely confusing. They wanted the opportunity to receive tutoring and direct instruction instead of a general tutorial or online training that assumes a certain baseline level of technological proficiency.

Like students, parents reported that when they did reach out with questions or concerns, their calls or emails were not returned, or they were not able to get the help they needed. One parent described, “I emailed the counselor a month and a half earlier when I saw that my son was having trouble with the subject matter, and no one responded to me. The school year ended and I didn't get an answer. I sent four or five messages.”

Another parent experienced similar frustrations: “I would call the school, and they wouldn’t be there. I’d write to the teacher, and they wouldn’t respond. I’d write the counselor, and they also wouldn’t respond. I couldn’t find anywhere to go for help.”

Parents want a responsive and accessible point person at each school who they can get to know and feel comfortable reaching out to with questions. As one parent stated, “I felt adrift, alone; I told them that we have to find a way so parents don’t feel like that; I understand this came suddenly to us, but we need that support, someone on the other side of the phone.”

Latino immigrant parents in particular often do not feel empowered or entitled to reach out with questions and concerns. These parents need individualized and proactive communication with someone who speaks Spanish and understands their circumstances.

The means for communicating with parents also must be more sensitive and responsive to their needs. Some low-income and immigrant families do not have email accounts, and others do not have reliable internet access to receive electronic communication. As one student explained, “they should work more with parents, not only through emails because they only send emails to inform things... they should use other means of communication to inform parents more easily, send postal mail because it is easier to see. We need to find better ways to communicate, not just email.”

Another student pointed out, “they send a lot of emails to parents and most Hispanic parents don’t know how to use their cell phones as much as we [students] do.” Communication with parents must go beyond email and other electronic messages, and include multiple low-tech platforms, in order to reach all parents. Communication must also not assume that students and families all have a level of technological familiarity and competence.

All communication, whether email, postal mail, or phone message, needs to be in parents’ native languages, at an accessible literacy level, and in multiple formats that are able to reach parents from a variety of backgrounds. As one Latino parent explained:

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I get a lot of phone calls from the school, but I receive them in English. I don’t know why. It’s hard for me to understand a lot of what they tell me. I also get their mail in English. When I do the translation, it isn’t good. My lack of knowledge of the system makes me not understand a lot.... It’s different because in my country, the system is very different than here.... In this country, everything is complicated for me.

Latino students also want schools to communicate more effectively and directly with parents about the demands and expectations for students. Some students explained that their parents who were not educated in the United States did not understand what online school is, that the students need to be on their computers for many hours at a time in order to be successful in school and that being on a cell phone was not a sign of disrespect.

Students felt torn between the demands of school and the demands of home life. If parents, particularly those who were not educated in the US, are taught, in ways that are accessible to them, how to understand schedules, expectations, and requirements for their children and the demands of online learning, they will be better equipped to support their students’ success.

THEME 3: Resources

Technology Resources

The need for better internet connectivity and reliable devices was a top priority among parents and students. Several parents in our sample described not being able to reliably connect to the internet, leaving their children to miss significant portions of online schooling:

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We didn't start any Zoom classes because it was live sessions. We kept getting kicked out, so it was harder for us. We didn't get to do any of the lessons or complete most of the work because we kept getting kicked off the internet. And MCPS offered the MiFi for the kids who didn't have wi-fi, but the kids who had connected to MiFi kept getting kicked off, so we didn't participate at all.

Students also described issues with unstable internet connections, and chronic problems with Chromebooks. They reported that Chromebooks were often too slow, or would break and be unusable. Students often resorted to using their phones when their Chromebooks were too slow or not functioning correctly, or they would share a household computer with siblings. Students who are on home instruction and/or are pursuing GEDs are MCPS students, were denied access to Chromebooks or MiFi hotspots, leaving many unable to continue their education at all.

For students and parents, having unreliable technology added considerable additional stress when they were already feeling overtaxed, and often led underserved students to be disengaged or not complete work. Parents also reported that they were unable to get help with technology problems. One parent told a story of contacting someone at MCPS to get help with logging her child into Zoom: “They said, ‘Do what the sheet says.’ I said, ‘Yes, I did what the sheet says but it doesn't let me enter. I can't.’ She said that she had a lot to do and that she wouldn't be able to help me. I just left there with that sheet, and I was just recently able to do it because what I needed was a computer since I had been doing it on my phone. That's all it was.” Parents uniformly expressed the need for accessible and consistently available technology assistance.

Mental Health Resources

The resource most commonly discussed as a need by both students and parents is access to mental health support. Both students and parents are well aware of the social, emotional, and psychological toll exacted by the pandemic, and students experience the already stretched mental health resources in schools as even more inaccessible. One student stated:

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I feel like there should be a lot more mental health workers in school. Not just for COVID, but for schools in general. More funding for mental health focused counselors because I feel like the counselors we have now aren't as focused on mental health. Like for me, it's really hard to approach my counselor for personal problems. I usually only go to him when I have to talk about changing my schedule. So, it's hard to approach him in that way.... we should have more funding for these types of counselors to actually support students.

Students were less interested in classroom-based social-emotional learning and more interested in opportunities to talk privately with someone about their mental health concerns.

Other Resources

► **Students expressed a need for private space to participate in classes and to do their work.**

One student described, “It’s complicated for me because I share the room with my mom; sometimes I don’t have privacy, sometimes she is on a call, sometimes she’s cleaning. I’d rather go somewhere quiet.” Students struggle with distractions in crowded living spaces, and many do not have a desk or other designated workspace.

► **High-school students are very concerned about accessing resources they need to apply for college.**

They are concerned that teachers will not get to know them well enough online to write strong letters of recommendation. They do not know how or when they will be able to take the SATs, and worry that they will have fewer opportunities to prepare and take the exams. Several students who are football players are worried that their opportunities for college scholarships are gone now that the football season is cancelled.

All students want more counseling and support around the college application process including scholarships and financial aid applications.

► **Students pursuing a GED, in addition to needing Chromebooks, also need to be able to access GED tests.**

Staff who work with these students describe them losing motivation because they think, “What’s the point of classes if I don’t know when I can take the test?”

They also describe the need for students to be able to use their MCPS IDs in order to sit for the GED exams. The current requirement that students need a state ID in order to take the exam is failing undocumented students who are capable, ready to take the exams, and in need of the GED certification in order to pursue college or other opportunities that would lift them out of poverty.

► **Parents described frustration with distribution of meals and other supplies.**

Meal distribution happens during limited times, in the middle of the day, when many parents are working and cannot come to pick up the food. Similarly, some families lack transportation, or need to spend up to 3 hours on public transportation to get to meal distribution sites, because Montgomery County has reduced bus routes and the number of passengers allowed on buses, due to the pandemic’s social distancing restrictions. Parents want distribution to occur at more locations and at times spread throughout the day and evening.

In addition, they asked for distribution of other supplies such as printed packets of work for children who are having trouble getting online, calculators for high school students, and art supplies for elementary school students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

It is Critical to Understand and Respond to Students' Lived Experiences

In order to meaningfully reduce the disparities in resources and opportunities that systematically disadvantage underserved Black, Latino, and low-income students, and drive differences in educational outcomes, MCPS must begin by investing in understanding the lived experiences of such children and families.

It is only by hearing the voices of those students and parents who have not traditionally been included in MCPS dialogues that the needs of these students can begin to be addressed. This understanding is not a one-time event, or unique to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It requires long-term, culturally sensitive, and systematic investment in getting to know families in underserved communities.

This includes hiring more school and central office staff who are members of these communities they serve. It also includes investing in proactive, trauma-informed outreach to students who are disengaged or failing, or at risk of disengagement or failure: seeking to understand the complexities of their lives rather than responding punitively to their disengagement.

2

Individualized and Proactive Outreach is a Necessity During Online Learning

During this period of online learning, MCPS must also dedicate resources to frequently, consistently, and directly connecting to students and families at risk of disengagement. These students need much more individualized and consistent attention and support initiated by the schools.

The school system must establish structures to meaningfully engage all students in learning. In order to enable their academic success, disengaged or marginally engaged students require one person who can check in on them regularly and consistently (by phone, email, and sometimes in person), assess their needs, connect them and their families to services in the community, and support their re-engagement in online education. This connection should include recognition of the stresses students are facing during this time, and periodic check-ins with each student to assess their needs, express caring, and foster a sense of belonging. This is an urgent priority during a time of crisis.

At least one staff member at every school must be tasked with keeping track of, and proactively reaching out to, students who are disengaged or marginally engaged. However, this effort cannot be an additional burden placed on teachers alone. Instead, MCPS must find ways to redeploy other school personnel (perhaps including parent coordinators, paraeducators, administrators, and resource staff) to assist in performing this critical outreach.

MCPS should also consider borrowing from the models of patient navigators, promotores, or community health workers - members of the local community who are hired to connect with members of their community who are in need. They can provide support and guidance about how to navigate online learning while attending to other needs and demands.

3

Students Need More Help from Adults

Socially distanced tents can be set up in parking lots of schools, parks, libraries, and other community spaces to provide individual tutoring in person (with masks) and outdoors, in order to provide in-person academic support. Tutoring can be by appointment and/or walk-in (if someone can control the waiting area to ensure that it is safe) and offer assistance at different grade levels and in different subjects.

To be useful, such tutoring should be on Wednesdays (since that is the day that MCPS has reserved for teacher planning and asynchronous learning), after-school hours and on weekends, and families should be notified about it through multiple means including phone calls, postal mail, text alerts, as well as emails.

Tutoring stations or “hubs” can be staffed by teaching staff as well as volunteers to include PTAs (pairing more resourced PTAs with schools that are less resourced), college students (many are not on campus at this time), high school students who can tutor elementary and middle school students, and other community-based volunteers. Tutoring for parents in accessing technology can also be included. Tutoring around college access should also be provided at high schools.

A homework help hotline can be set up and staffed evenings and weekends, in at least English and Spanish, so that students (and/or parents) can call for assistance with a variety of assignments. Again, families would have to be notified about such a service through multiple means including phone calls, postal mail, text alerts, as well as emails.

Students also need more social time with their peers. Students and parents recommend that schools organize socially distanced social time on Wednesdays and/or after school, with optional activities such as book clubs for elementary students, trivia and game nights for middle and high school students, and general Zoom hangouts that groups of peers can access.

4

Parents Need More Socialization / Education about Online Learning

Parents need training in MyMCPS, Zoom, and other relevant technologies that go beyond a webinar, and include opportunities for individual consultation. Training – including videos, webinars, and individual consultations – must be in languages other than English and must not assume technological proficiency.

Many parents, particularly those who were not educated in the US, would also benefit from education about online learning – what it is, what students need to do, and how they can support their students in being successful. This socialization/education needs to be accessible in different languages and different formats, including videos, podcasts, or other materials for parents who have limited literacy.

Relatedly, parents are also asking for more information about accessing needed resources in the community. This includes rental assistance and/or eviction protections, food resources, and health care resources.

5

Communication Must be Frequent and Varied

In order to be accessible to all parents, all communication must happen across multiple formats, some of which are not electronic. Forms of communication must include postal mail, and phone calls (both robocalls and individualized calls) in addition to emails and text messages. Communication must be in families' native languages and accessible to parents who have limited literacy in any language. Phone trees can be used within a school regarding events and other important updates related to that school. Any emails or text messages sent to parents should also be sent to middle and high school students.

Parents and students want much more frequent and consistent communication (in all forms) from MCPS, from their schools, and from teachers. They want regular updates on changes in policies, schedules, and school happenings. They also want at least one designated person at each school who will be immediately available and responsive by phone when questions and concerns arise. A lack of accessible information leaves students and parents anxious, frustrated, and disengaged.

6

Expectations Must be Clear to Everyone

Students, parents, and teachers all need to be provided clear, consistent, and concrete information about expectations for teachers' availability to students. Parents and students also need clear, simple, frequent, and accessible information about who to contact for help, how quickly to expect a response, and what to do if they do not get a timely response. Teachers need clear guidance about what time commitments are expected of them, how long they will take to respond to inquiries and who is accountable for tracking and re-engaging students.

7

More Accessible Resources are Needed

Chromebooks often don't work and are therefore not usable by students. An IT phone hotline, fully staffed in English and Spanish with extended evening and weekend hours, is needed to help students and parents troubleshoot problems with Chromebooks, Wireless Internet, and software. The hotline must be advertised frequently, in multiple languages, and through non-electronic means. Parents and students must also be made comfortable (and not questioned or blamed) reporting broken Chromebooks and asking for a replacement. Chromebooks and MiFi hotspots must be made available to home instruction/GED students.

Non-technology resources, including textbooks, worksheets and packets, school supplies, calculators, and art supplies should be distributed for students in need. Meal distribution must also be expanded. Distribution for all grade levels must be held at all school locations and/or other community sites, so families can access the distribution location most convenient to them. Hours of distribution of meals and other resources must be expanded so that working parents can access them outside of working hours.

Students need more access to individual mental health resources within schools and communities. Mental health resources, including online counseling, must be available outside of school hours and in the student's language.

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THE BLACK AND BROWN
COALITION FOR
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY
AND EXCELLENCE

The Black and Brown Coalition was founded in 2019 by Identity, Inc. and the Montgomery County Chapter of the NAACP. The Coalition is comprised of over 30 organizations who are committed to increasing equity in schools for Black, Brown and low-income children.

Learn more at bandbcoalition.org