

POLICY BRIEF

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Ensuring That the Coming Academic Year Does Not Cement or Add to the Unequal Learning That Has Occurred During Remote Learning?

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Each year, millions of children and families across the United States experience significant hardship and loss in their lives outside of school. These hardships are frequently material, such as housing instability and homelessness, or psychological stresses, including the loss of a loved one or abuse. And while all students are at some risk for these experiences, poverty and its attendant constellation of multiple overlapping hardships and stresses – often talked about in terms of exposure to structural violence – mean that some children are much more likely to experience one or more of these stressors, often chronically. This truth is only exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. The current pandemic forces us to confront the ways in which exposure to structural violence, historically greatest in communities of color, fundamentally circumscribes the lives – and so, too, the deaths – of children, families, and communities in our cities and across the country.

One of the most enduring challenges of addressing the impact of exposure to structural violence on children's performance in school – and one that, by extension, is likely to be magnified in the remote learning context created by the COVID-19 crisis – is the relative ease with which children's coping behavior is systematically misinterpreted by educators and administrators. Within classrooms and schools, but perhaps even more so in the virtual environment, subtly racialized narratives supply adults with easy and readily available scripts for (mis)interpreting and (mis)labeling the internalizing (depressive, socially withdrawn) and externalizing (aggressive, disruptive) behaviors that previous research suggests accompany children's experiences of unresolved stress and trauma. Internalizing behavior, which in the remote context may be all but invisible to educators, because of the likelihood that depressed or withdrawn children simply do not log on to Zoom calls or Google Classroom, is easily attributed to disinterest or disengagement. Externalizing behavior, which in the remote context may appear as disruptions of virtual spaces but also may be exhibited as aggressive

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acting out elsewhere in children's homes and communities as well, is easily attributed to a lack of impulse control or the absence of anger management strategies.

Because the behavior of children of color is frequently viewed through the prism of racial stereotypes that emphasize and interpret precisely these behaviors in terms of character deficiency, one of the most important ways in which educators, administrators, and district officials can address the challenge of ensuring that the coming school year does not cement the varying degrees to which children have engaged in the virtual environment is by designing systems and structures at the school level to support educators in actively dismantling these narratives and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children in the district.

A forward-looking agenda for both policy and practice requires action at multiple levels to disrupt the existing ways in which structural violence persistently disadvantages children of color in classrooms and schools across the district, as well as the development and fostering of creative, novel ways to assess and address children's well-being. High-quality teacher-student relationships are key to any successful plan as such relationships can serve as a protective factor, mitigating the harmful effects of exposure to structural violence and chronic stress. Such relationships, which support students and help them make meaning can prevent or reduce lasting toxic and traumatizing effects of stress. With particular regard to ensuring that children's capacity to access, engage, and succeed in the virtual environment during the COVID-19 crisis does not harden or worse, deepen existing inequity in the school system, previous research suggests such actions might include:

- **Exploring and developing creative, holistic ways to assess children's well-being, particularly in the virtual environment**, as it increasingly appears that the 2020-21 school-year is likely to include the ongoing use of remote learning options as necessary components of an evolving social distancing strategy. In order to be responsive to children and families' needs, educators require novel approaches for learning about, recognizing and validating, and engaging with the lived experiences of their students. Understanding and empathy are at a premium in the midst of the current crisis; however, educators and administrators must be equipped to engage authentically and respectfully across difference (e.g. race, class, background) with students, families, and communities in order to create a climate of trust and support.
- **Creating systems, structures, and resources to support educators in ongoing reflective practice surrounding not only the effectiveness of their instructional practice, but also the health – the extent, depth, and quality – of their relationships with children and families.** Providing educators with time, space, and support to explore their own racial identity and its intersection with the identities of the children, families, and communities they serve forms a key backdrop to the effort to understand, empathize with, and ultimately respond actively to the needs of children and families. Developing and identifying practices, protocols, and tools that support educators in acting deliberately to foster and sustain strong, supportive relationships with the students,

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families, and communities they serve is key. Monitoring the health of these crucial relationships provides a check not only on children's well-being, but on the capacity of the adults surrounding them to respond in a timely and constructive manner.

- **Strengthening the infrastructure and resources within schools in order to support educators and administrators' efforts to collaborate with one another in providing seamless, integrated support to children and families.** It is critically important to invest time, energy, and resources in creating systems for sharing information and insight, and ultimately responsibility for responding to children and families' material and psychological needs. School counselors, social workers, and clinicians are a critical part of this infrastructure.

Ultimately, while these are all important components of a thoughtful response to the COVID-19 crisis, designed to ensure that the ways in which children's varying capacity to engage in remote learning over the third and fourth quarters of this school year is not cemented in the form of further isolation and disadvantage over the 2020-21 school-year, they are recognizably insufficient. The exposure to structural violence that children of color disproportionately experience is not a given; it is a product of the ongoing operation of systems of oppression, exploitation, and neglect that systematically exclude Black and brown children from opportunity. In this larger sense, the COVID-19 crisis is like a radiologist's contrast dye, injected into the body politic – we can see with terrific clarity how broken and dysfunctional American society is. Marshalling the collective will to address the structural factors and create and reproduce poverty, inequity, and exclusion in American society is an order of magnitude more complex – but no less necessary – than addressing the intricate, overlapping impacts of the novel coronavirus on our communities, cities, and society as a whole.¹

David Johnson is a senior research analyst with the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. His current research explores efforts to develop supports for educators that merge racial and cultural identity development and awareness with instructional improvement strategies.

¹ For additional information, including full references and citations, please see Allensworth, et al., (2018). Supporting social, emotional, & academic development: Research implications for educators. Chicago, IL: UChicago Consortium on School Research.