RESEARCH BRIEF

EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND SCHOOL STAFF IN 2020

BOSTON COLLEGE CENTER FOR THRIVING CHILDREN

As schools reopened for remote, hybrid, or in-person learning in Fall 2020, what student needs arose, intensified, or persisted? As schools reopen in Fall 2021, how might we learn from education stakeholders' needs and challenges from Fall 2020? How might evidence-based approaches help?

Key Findings from Fall 2020

- Prominent family needs included access to technology, technical support for remote learning, food, and child care.
- Work-related stress and burnout were substantial challenges for teachers and school staff.
- Pre-existing relationships may have mitigated challenges of access to some resources and promoted communication among school staff.

OVERVIEW

As the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered schools in Spring 2020, children, families, and staff in high-poverty schools faced the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing racial and economic injustice. Historical inequities in access to resources and opportunities for families of color, and families living in low-income environments, have led to a disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on education stakeholders in urban, high-poverty schools. This brief summarizes:

- Student and family needs during Fall 2020, in light of needs that arose at the outset of the pandemic in Spring 2020
- Challenges that students, families, teachers, and other school staff encountered during Fall 2020

Education stakeholders participated in City Connects, an evidence-based[1–4] integrated student support intervention that implements a whole-child, systemic approach to identify student strengths and needs, and provide support for all students in a school. City Connects coordinators, key personnel who work closely with students, families, and school staff in over 70 schools in three states, shared the needs and challenges they observed.

Coordinators provide a unique and actionable vantage point. They have contact with all education

stakeholders, understand all students' strengths and needs, and have outreach and prior relationships with families and community partners.

Coordinator responses showed that education stakeholders in high-poverty schools experienced substantial needs and challenges with socio-emotional, family, academic, and basic needs, underscoring the breadth and depth of the pandemic's effects. Because each individual student and family will experience the challenges of the pandemic differently, students need universal and individually-tailored access to holistic supports[5,6] that account for the complex dynamics of child development[7] and changing family circumstances.

City Connects is a school-based intervention that annually serves approximately 30,000 students in high-poverty, mostly K-8 schools, in multiple U.S. states.

At the core of the intervention is the coordinator, a masters-trained school counselor or social worker who works full time in the school as a hub of student support. The coordinator collaborates with staff and families to learn the strengths and needs of every student every year, across academic, socio-emotional/behavioral, health, and family domains. The coordinator then creates a tailored plan of enrichments and supports for each student through community partnerships. The coordinator monitors the plan and adjusts as needed throughout the year.

Throughout 2020, coordinators have been on the front lines responding to students and families disproportionately affected by the pandemic, supporting teachers and school staff, and working with community agencies to coordinate services. Coordinators identified, triaged, and coordinated responses to stakeholder needs, which positioned City Connects to provide a window into the pandemic's ongoing effects. Coordinators could draw on their pre-existing and ongoing relationships with education stakeholders to illuminate needs and challenges. Their perspectives serve as a crucial step to understand the compounding and emerging consequences of COVID-19 and to shed light on a systemic approach to respond to student and family needs during the pandemic.

In Fall 2020, coordinators worked across three states and eleven districts; re-opening guidelines differed across districts and states. As we show in Table 1, only 14% of coordinators worked at schools with fully in-person learning and worked in the school, whereas about half of coordinators worked in schools with remote learning and were working from home.

Table 1. Percent of coordinators in each type of school instructional model per work location. Hybrid models refer to any combination of in-school and remote learning in the school (*n* = 72).

	In school	Hybrid	At home	Total
In-person learning	14%	0%	0%	14%
Hybrid learning	22%	6%	4%	32%
Remote learning	1%	4%	49%	54%
Total	37%	10%	54%	

IN NOVEMBER 2020, FAMILIES NEEDED ACCESS TO CRUCIAL SUPPORTS

Coordinators reported several socio-emotional, family, academic, and basic needs for students and families. As we show in Figure 1, the greatest needs were for technology (e.g., Chromebooks), technical support with online learning platforms, food, and child care for learning or supervision. As these categories of needs emerged from our prior research on the pandemic,[8] findings suggest these needs persisted for many students and families in both Spring and Fall 2020.

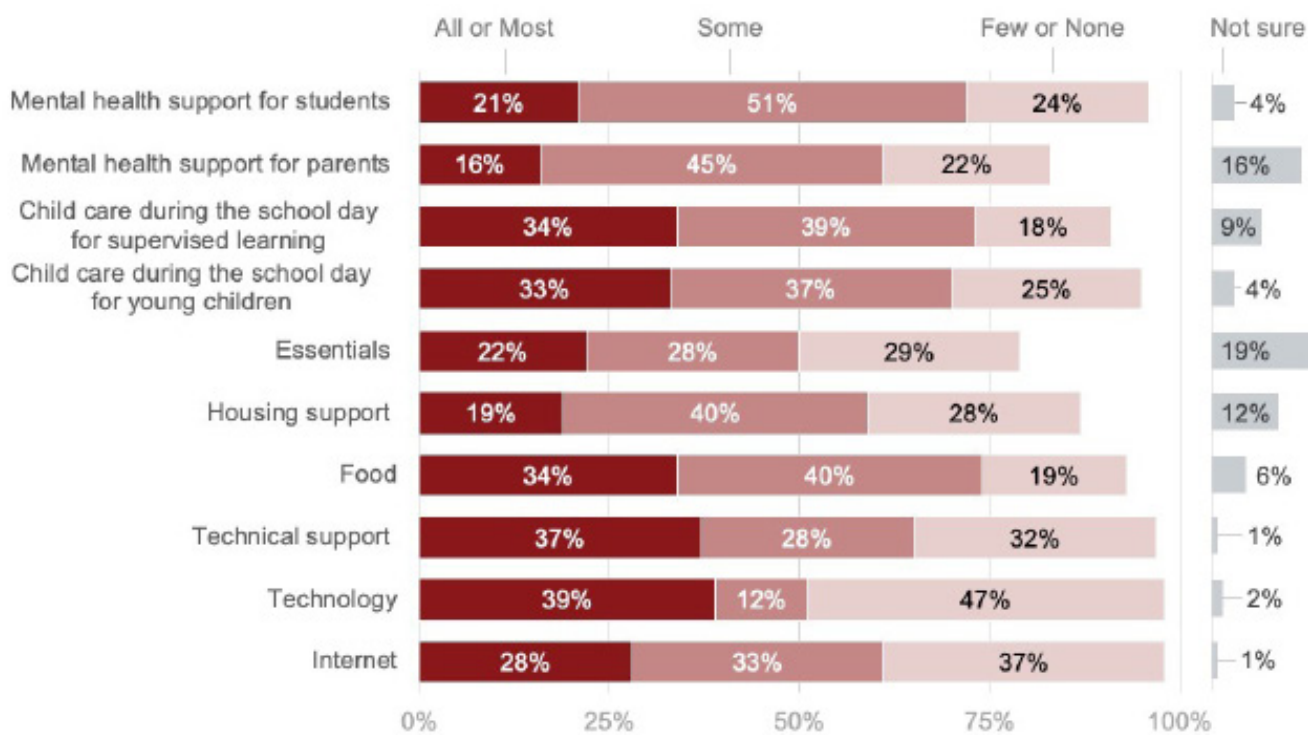|	All or Most	Some	Few or None	Not sure
Mental health support for students	21%	51%	24%	4%
Mental health support for parents	16%	45%	22%	16%
Child care during the school day for supervised learning	34%	39%	18%	9%
Child care during the school day for young children	33%	37%	25%	4%
Essentials	22%	28%	29%	19%
Housing support	19%	40%	28%	12%
Food	34%	40%	19%	6%
Technical support	37%	28%	32%	1%
Technology	39%	12%	47%	2%
Internet	28%	33%	37%	1%

Figure 1. Percent of coordinators who estimated how many students and families were in need of access to each resource in their school (n = 67). Notes. Essentials: medication, baby or hygiene supplies. Housing support: rent relief, vouchers. Technical support: online learning platforms. Technology: Chromebooks.

As we show in Figure 2, students and families had challenges across health, socio-emotional support, and access to resources. Most notably, 52% of coordinators reported that fear of contracting COVID-19 was extremely or very challenging for students and families. More than 30% of coordinators reported that mental health interventions, housing support, translation support for non-English speaking families, technology support, and internet access were extremely or very challenging for students and families. In contrast, more than 40% of coordinators reported that physical health support, socio-emotional support, essentials, and food support were slightly or not challenging for students and families.

Importantly, it may be that while many families were in need of these supports, existing systems in City Connects schools were able to meet those needs. For example, Figure 1 suggests a substantial need for food for students and families. The low percentage of coordinators who reported food support as very or extremely challenging for students and families (see Figure 2) suggests that systems in place may be able to ease the challenge of food access.
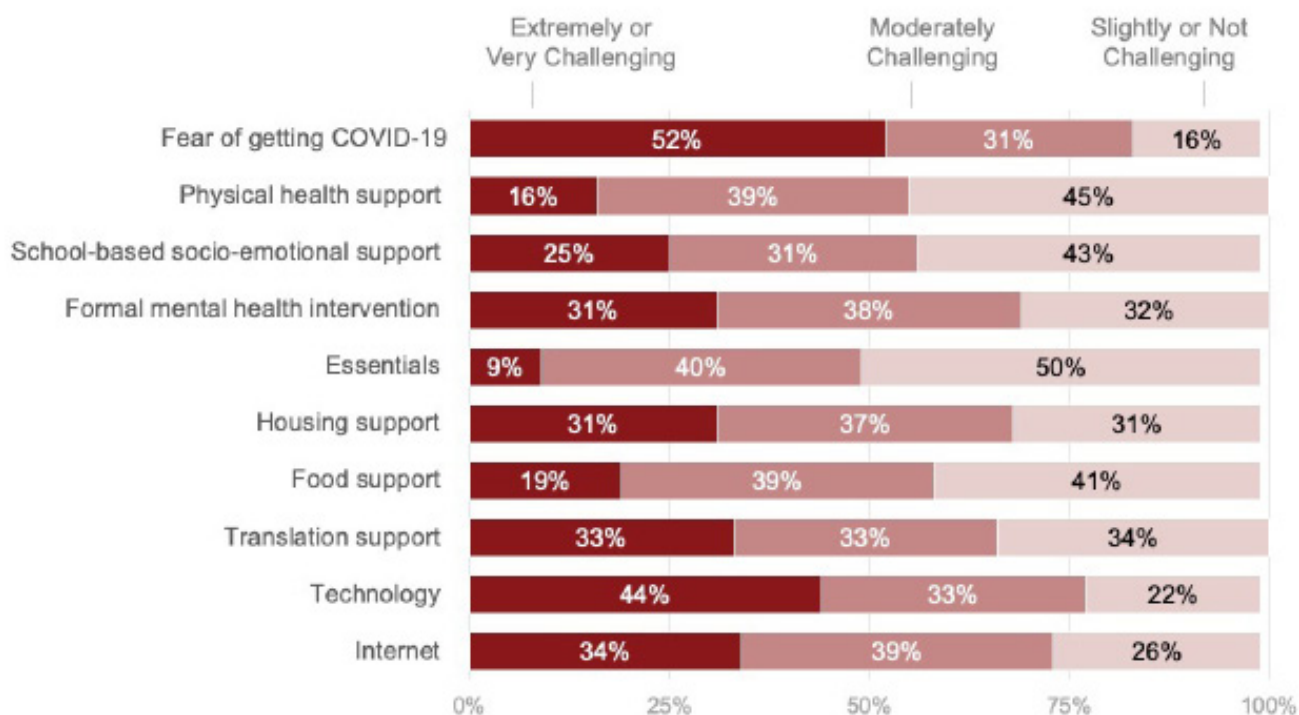

Figure 2. Percent of coordinators who estimated how challenging each item was for students and families (n = 67).

Additionally, we asked coordinators to report other challenges for students and families not captured in Figure 2. Coordinators shared that additional prevalent challenges were family job loss, management of at-home learning, and student engagement. Several Fall 2020 challenges had also been prevalent in spring,[8] including food, technology and internet access, support for remote learning, and socio-emotional support.

As we show in Figure 3, work-related stress and teacher and staff burnout were a widespread and substantial challenge, with more than 75% of coordinators reporting they were extremely or very challenging for teachers and school staff. Similar to students and families (see Figure 2), many coordinators reported that teachers and school staff found fear of getting COVID-19 extremely or very challenging. Almost half of coordinators reported that teachers and school staff found communication with students and families extremely or very challenging. In contrast, most coordinators reported that communication among staff was slightly or not challenging, which suggests that communication channels within the school – in-person or in the remote learning environment – were working well for the majority of schools implementing City Connects.
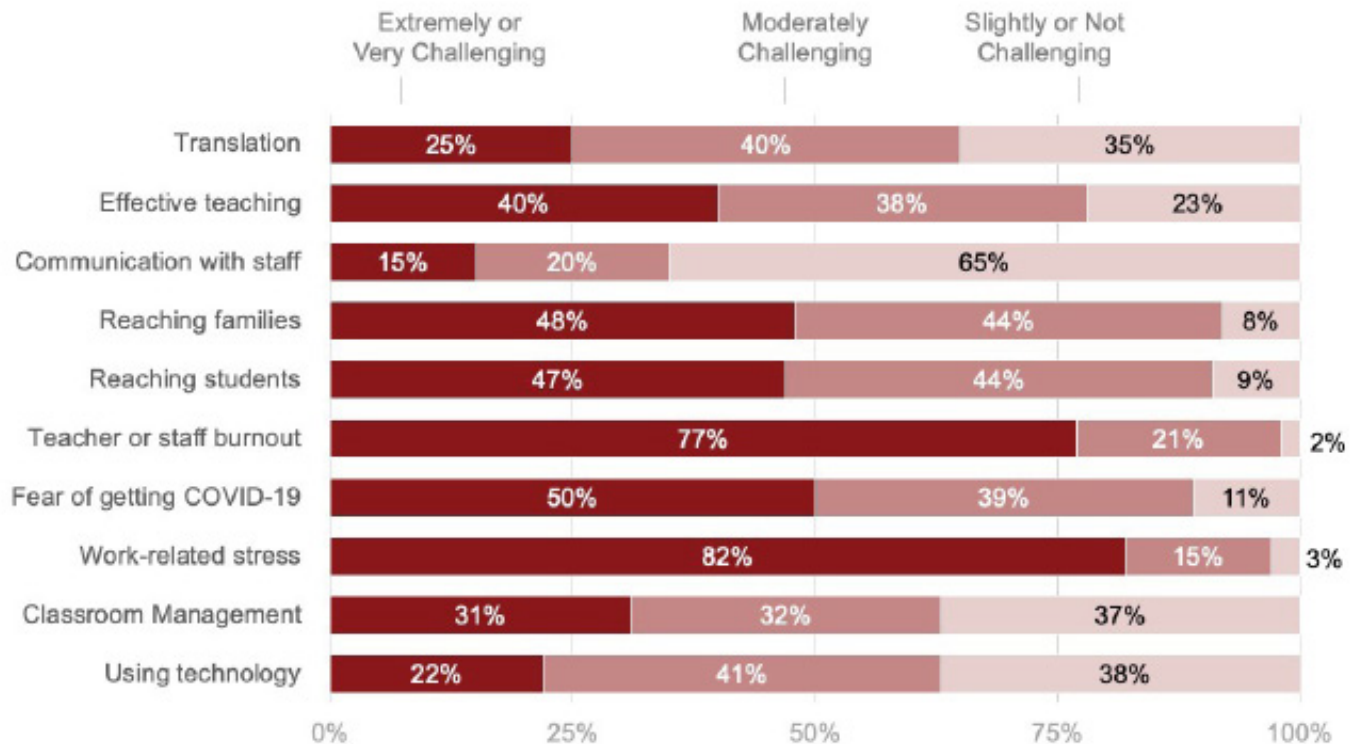
	Extremely or Very Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Slightly or Not Challenging
Translation	25%	40%	35%
Effective teaching	40%	38%	23%
Communication with staff	15%	20%	65%
Reaching families	48%	44%	8%
Reaching students	47%	44%	9%
Teacher or staff burnout	77%	21%	2%
Fear of getting COVID-19	50%	39%	11%
Work-related stress	82%	15%	3%
Classroom Management	31%	32%	37%
Using technology	22%	41%	38%

Figure 3. Percent of coordinators who estimated how challenging each item was for teachers and school staff (n = 65).

Prevalent challenges that coordinators reported were uncertainty and changing policies, student attendance and engagement, and clarity and adherence to school policies. Several challenges echo teacher and school staff needs from Spring 2020,[8] including high levels of teacher stress, fear of contracting COVID-19, and concerns about student engagement.

The Fall 2020 needs and challenges of stakeholders in City Connects schools build on our learning about the early effects of COVID-19[8] and what others have found in U.S. schools more broadly, such as families' need for, and lack of access to, necessities like food, shelter, and social support[9], and school staff challenges with remote learning and communication with families.[10] Persistent needs and challenges underscore the importance of ongoing tailored supports across domains.

Burnout and work-related stress may be prevalent and substantial challenges for teachers and school staff. Coupled with existing evidence of COVID-19-related teacher burnout,[10–13] findings suggest a crucial need for socio-emotional support for teachers and school staff.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, it is vital to monitor needs and challenges for education stakeholders over time, especially for those who have been disproportionately impacted. A systematic approach to understanding and addressing complex and changing student needs can provide timely and actionable insights, enabling education stakeholders to more successfully weather the current and longer-term effects of COVID-19.

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MARY E. WALSH CENTER
FOR THRIVING CHILDREN

In November 2020, we invited coordinators to complete an anonymous survey about their ongoing work during the pandemic. Seventy-three of the 90 invited coordinators participated.

This brief includes a subset of responses from a larger 15-minute survey on coordinator response to the pandemic. Likert-scale and open-ended items solicited coordinator perceptions of needs and challenges across stakeholders. We determined item stems for questions about needs and challenges based on our prior research on coordinator work in the months after school closures during Spring 2020.[8] Open-ended items solicited additional stakeholder challenges, to illuminate new effects of COVID-19.

For Likert-scale items, we calculated percentages of coordinator responses for each answer choice. We used conventional content analysis[14] to analyze coordinators' responses to open-ended questions of additional stakeholder challenges. This approach is well-suited to phenomena with limited theory and research, such as the effects of COVID-19, and generates suggestions for research or practice. Two coders analyzed responses through familiarization with the data, developing codes, and determining code categories. Below are the survey questions that informed this brief.

What is your school's current model for instruction?
In-person
Hybrid (in-person and remote)
All remote
Other: _____

Please estimate how many students/families are in need of each resource in your school
(All, most, some, few, none, not sure)
Access to internet
Access to technology (e.g., Chromebooks)
Access to technical support (e.g., Google Classroom, ClassDojo)
Access to food
Access to housing support (e.g., rent relief, vouchers)
Access to essentials (e.g., medication, baby supplies, hygiene supplies)
Access to child care during the school day for young children
Access to child care during the school day for supervised learning
Access to mental health support for parents
Access to mental health support for students

In your opinion, how much of a challenge is each of the following for students/families
(Extremely challenging, very challenging, moderately challenging, slightly challenging, not challenging at all)
Internet
Technology (e.g., computers)
Translation support
Food support
Housing support
Essentials (e.g., baby supplies, hygiene supplies)
Formal mental health intervention
School-based socio-emotional support
Physical health support
Fear of getting COVID-19

Please describe any other challenges for students/families

In your opinion, how much of a challenge is each of the following for teachers/staff
(Extremely challenging, very challenging, moderately challenging, slightly challenging, not challenging at all)
Using technology (e.g., Google Classroom, Zoom)
Classroom management
Work-related stress
Fear of getting COVID-19
Teacher or staff burnout
Reaching students
Reaching families
Communication with staff
Effective teaching
Translation

Please describe any other challenges for teachers/staff