



MEMORANDUM

To: K1C Partners
From: Kids First Chicago
Date: March 27, 2020
Re: What we've heard: Urgent & Emerging Needs of CPS Families

Partners & Friends:

Like many, as our world began to rapidly shift as a result of COVID-19, our team hunkered down to do what we do best--ask parents what they need.

Stories of Chicago families' resilience have been humbling and inspiring for our team at Kids First Chicago.

Many of you have reached out to ask what we've been hearing from the families who we partner closest with -- how they are coping, managing day-to-day while schools remain shuttered, and planning for the foreseeable future.

Three major themes have emerged from the hundreds of conversations we've had over the last two weeks:

ACCESS TO BASIC NEEDS

As a historic number of Americans apply for unemployment benefits, our most vulnerable families have been hard hit by cuts to their wages, furloughs, layoffs and more. Making ends meet to independently support their families' basic needs has become nearly impossible.

- Parents described fear and shame around accessing emergency resources -- concerns that are even most pronounced for undocumented Chicagoans.
- As wages dry up, families face tough decisions about paying monthly bills, including rent. Parents spoke of concerns about possible evictions and compounded rent debt.

A Back of the Yards parent shared, "No one is financially prepared. My only source of income is the child support I receive from my children's father -- it pays my rent. If he can't work, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Another parent added, "I am a single mother of three daughters and currently have no income due to this Coronavirus pandemic. The only government assistance I receive is Link for food. I love working with the community and dedicate myself to helping others on a daily basis, but at this time I am in need of assistance. Because I have been off of work without pay, I currently can't afford to provide for my children or pay my rent."

- Parents struggle with uncertainty about access to food, toiletries, vital medications, and supplies; most households are already operating in austerity mode. Parents from the Austin community shared that families are worried about access to food and are having difficulty accessing essential items like diapers and baby wipes.

One parent shared, "I'm caring for a lot of kids; I'm specifically worried about food."

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A Humboldt Park parent stated, “My house was not ready to feed four kids and myself three times a day. I was able to get some things, but the amount of food I need to provide for my family gives me anxiety.”

- Families express concern about access to credible and quality information, alluding to the vast digital divide that not only keeps their children idling at home, instead of learning in school, but also elevates a bigger societal question about digital access as a civil right in America. For education, business, and more, COVID-19 has made our ability to move seamlessly face-to-face and virtual engagement a necessity.

WELLNESS

Like all of us, the ever-changing guidance coming from the Federal Government has only added to anxiety and uncertainty about when this crisis will end. Parents feel an amplified amount of stress over the possibility of sudden and drastic changes to their household circumstances. They are bored and simultaneously overwhelmed, panicked, fearful, isolated, and lonely. What’s more troubling, their children don’t know how to process what is happening -- and they, as parents, can’t provide reassuring answers.

One West Side parent shared, “I have three children at home with three different sets of needs: different learning needs, different food needs, etc. The children don’t understand the situation. I’m not sure how to get them all on a schedule. I need help.”

A family of six from the Northwest Side also described constant stress: “We are preparing a list of things we are missing. Everyone is home--my husband and four kids. We are very worried about the rent and the bills coming up.”

EDUCATION

Chicago Public Schools remain closed until at least April 21. While some individual schools and charter networks are able to offer remote learning options, the majority of CPS families have been left on their own to continue learning. As a result, the many barriers to a quality education that already existed before COVID-19 have been compounded.

- As mentioned, a big source of inequity within Chicago is technology access -- access to devices and high-speed internet -- to enable continued learning. Truthfully, in households without access to digital resources, students likely already struggled to get homework done, communicate with teachers and classmates, and ask questions on school projects -- even before this crisis hit.
- Students without access to devices or the internet -- many who may have already been behind their peers -- are most certainly falling further behind.

For example, one parent talked about her four kids having to use technology at home for e-learning and the challenges of only having one computer to share among them. She added, “Teachers are also giving my kids the same time to get on Zoom, which does not help because of the lack of technology [devices]. I am a teacher, but I don’t know how to teach everything and my kids are in dual language classes, so I’m even less knowledgeable about that. It just creates a lot of tension because I do not want my kids to fall behind. I’m doing the best I can right now.”

Another parent expressed, “Chrome books need to be made available. Luckily I was able to take my computer from work home, other parents in other schools did not, which is

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stressing families out. Having computers locked away in schools is a waste and should be given to the students that need them.”

- While students fall behind, grade promotions and graduation remain uncertain.
- Students with special learning accommodations and needs are especially vulnerable right now. Parents say they are simply not receiving the support that they’ve fought so hard to secure in recent years.

A parent of two diverse learners on the South Side shared, “Both of my children have autism -- trying to teach them both 1-on-1 is impossible. Teachers send assignments via email, but I have limitations to how I can help them. We only have one computer and I don't know much about technology. They need their teachers. They are missing out on education.”

- Finally, parents need guidance about remote learning, how to gain access to quality at-home learning programs and educator support, and how best to structure learning for a broad range of learners and levels.

At Kids First Chicago, we are committed to finding a pathway for the city to help address digital barriers and for CPS to build its capacity to deliver remote learning to the pockets of the city where it's so badly needed.

If we can work together to resolve the digital divide right now, during this time of crisis, we believe we can help create a more connected, equitable city. This goes *far beyond education*.

It’s been heartening to hear from many of you, who are bringing significant resources, creative thinking and, above all, a profound belief in our shared responsibility to care for one another and our neighbors in their time of great need.

We’re going to keep connecting with parents and promise to share what we learn with you. We hope you’ll relay what you’re learning from your connections, too.

[OPEN SURVEY] If you have specific questions for families about efforts you’re trying to lead or launch in the wake of COVID-19, please leave your questions via this short survey: <https://forms.gle/5bupM7JD7usUfN4A9>. We will do our very best to incorporate them into our ongoing engagement with Chicago families.

Yours in putting Chicago families first,
[The Kids First Chicago team](#)

P.S. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW FROM PARENTS? Add your questions [here](#).