

VOICES OF LEADERS FOR JUST SCHOOLS:  
EDUCATION JUSTICE THROUGH AND  
BEYOND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



# Introduction

In March 2020, schools across the country began to close in response to the spread of COVID-19, which quickly developed into a global pandemic. As it became apparent that this would not be a short-term concern, these closures became building closures, not school closures. The coronavirus has forced educators, students, and their families to quickly transition from in-person instruction to distance learning, with little time to prepare for this shift.

In light of the many challenges and concerns that the local, state, and national responses to this global pandemic have laid bare, a group of NEA members—who all participated in a new leadership program built around education justice—began conversing. They discussed how, in this unprecedented time, educators and policymakers can address inequities and work to ensure an equitable and just learning environment for every student.

This document represents the voices of these NEA member leaders who are advocating on behalf of students across the country.

# Why Should We Listen to These Educators?

In 2019, two cohorts of member leaders began a learning journey through a new program created by the National Education Association (NEA) called Leaders for Just Schools—a comprehensive training with cohorts of educators who were nominated by state association presidents throughout the country. Participants studied the concept of equity and its impact on learning environments. Upon completing the first year of the training, these member leaders were called upon to spread the word about how we can create excellent and just learning environments for all students. Participants leapt to action—facilitating trainings, starting clubs, hosting community conversations, participating in district and statewide committees, lobbying state and local governments, and more—and their efforts to proactively engage with decision-makers, call out inequities, and inspire change are already making a difference.

Despite widespread school building closures, the implementation of digital learning plans, and a national health emergency unlike anything we have experienced, steadfast LJS participants have not stopped their advocacy efforts. They have continued to address inequities in our school systems. In fact, their devotion is amplified in these uncertain times as they recognize the importance of raising their voices to weigh in on how the pandemic is addressed in school systems, how supports are designed and rolled out in communities, and how education systems can prepare for reopening schools in the future. More than ever, their conversations can provide valuable insight into how we can design a path forward for learning throughout the country.

This document is designed to capture the “big ideas” gleaned from hours of online conversations that the NEA hosted with LJS participants since school building closures began. We hope that the advice and impressions of these devoted and knowledgeable educators can help you as you contribute to designing a school reentry program that contemplates the effects of having an extended hiatus from in-person learning.

A network of more than 200 LJS participants from across the country are prepared to assist in increasing the capacity of schools and districts to design learning plans and policies that ensure no student or family is forgotten as we forge a path forward following the COVID-19 pandemic.

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# Why Are These Times Unprecedented?

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) is creating serious, complicated, and immediate challenges for educators, students and their families, and communities. COVID-19 has prompted widespread school closures, transitions to online learning, and questions about how our students and educators move forward during this

challenging time. In response, the NEA is working to assist in providing feedback and guidance to states, districts, and schools regarding how best to respond to this ongoing national emergency.

The NEA recognizes that planning the reopening of schools constitutes a national call to action for educators. We are all navigating uncharted territory together—governments, individuals, and school systems alike. NEA members are facing a critical moment in how they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and their advocacy has never been more important. Educators who received training in the Leaders for Just Schools program are uniquely qualified to lead

in this work. In the coming months, it will be imperative to coordinate feedback on funding priorities, proposed waivers, and adjustments to accountability systems.

The public will have the opportunity to comment on state and district guidance for teaching and learning throughout the pandemic. Educators should take every opportunity to weigh in on these requests and any local distance learning plans as they will set the priorities for how federal funds are spent in their local education systems. No other stakeholder group is able to bring to the table what educators do in terms of their perspectives, knowledge, and insights into what students and families need most in these uncertain times. For this reason, the NEA believes the input of our members—and especially LJS member leaders—is extremely valuable as the nation plans what is next for our students and schools.

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## What Are the Current Practices Taking Place Across the Country?

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequities in education across the country. These inequities—based on race, socioeconomic status, and ZIP code—have always existed, but the need to drastically change how we serve our nation’s public school students has made these injustices more visible and more dire.

In speaking with LJS member leaders, we have learned that schools across the country are responding to the pandemic and school building closures in vastly different ways. We know that public school leaders across the country are doing their best to ensure that their students are supported. Although some school districts really are tuned into the racial and social justice implications of their decisions, others have an opportunity to improve their practices to ensure that all students can continue to receive an equitable education. This section will illustrate some of the good practices that school districts are employing as well as some of the measures that could be implemented to improve equity.



Category	Equitable Practices	Opportunities for Growth
<b>Educators as Professionals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Districts are working to provide mental health supports for educators.</li> <li>✓ ESPs continuing to work to provide meals are receiving hazard pay.</li> <li>✓ Districts are continuing to pay substitute teachers based on an average of time worked.</li> <li>✓ All educators are still being paid for their work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Educators are expected to be logged in and online for their entire workday contract.</li> <li>✓ Educators have little input in how teaching/learning should be implemented, and communication from districts is limited.</li> <li>✓ Educators were assumed to have home Internet access.</li> <li>✓ Reduction-in-force notices are being threatened, particularly for ESPs.</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching, Learning, and Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Educators are providing a developmentally appropriate amount of remote instruction, using a combination of online synchronous, online asynchronous, and nondigital options.</li> <li>✓ Educators are focusing on social-emotional wellness to ensure that students' needs are still addressed.</li> <li>✓ Standardized testing has been suspended.</li> <li>✓ Districts are creating grading practices with an eye toward equity: pass/fail options; grades can only be improved during building closures; and limiting the number of grades assigned.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Students are expected to be on teleconferencing programs or working for the entire school day. This is particularly problematic in houses with multiple students and with limited devices or Internet bandwidth.</li> <li>✓ Districts are proceeding with a "business as usual" model in continuing to assign grades.</li> <li>✓ Districts are offering instruction but not requiring any engagement activities.</li> <li>✓ Early childhood education programs have been suspended.</li> </ul>
<b>Supports for Students with Disabilities and English Learners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Special education and EL teachers are providing differentiated support for classroom teachers.</li> <li>✓ IEPs are still being followed, where appropriate.</li> <li>✓ IEP meetings are being held where access and privacy can be ensured.</li> <li>✓ Social-emotional learning is being prioritized.</li> <li>✓ ELs are supported by educators in customized lessons through both online and offline formats.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ IEP meetings are not being held and may expire.</li> <li>✓ Some students with disabilities, such as those who are nonverbal, are receiving little to no services.</li> <li>✓ Families have limited access to translators/interpreters.</li> <li>✓ In cases where educators speak the student's home language, educators are being required to only communicate in English.</li> <li>✓ EL students and students with disabilities are receiving "enrichment-only" instruction.</li> </ul>

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<b>Access to Resources and Technology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Schools are providing hotspots or partnering with local Internet service providers to connect families.</li> <li>✓ School buses are being equipped with Wi-Fi hotspots and bus drivers are driving to under-connected communities to allow students to download and upload work.</li> <li>✓ School buses are serving as resource hubs to provide additional learning packets and books.</li> <li>✓ Districts are providing alternative forms of distance education for those who cannot access the Internet.</li> <li>✓ Educators are creating lessons to be delivered on local television stations and/or social media platforms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ ISP partners are not connecting families with outstanding balances or those without a Social Security number.</li> <li>✓ Districts are not providing devices to students, even if they own them, because of concerns about liability.</li> <li>✓ Pick-up time for devices was offered as a single event, which may have not been convenient for families.</li> <li>✓ Districts may require a photo ID to pick up a device.</li> <li>✓ Platforms for delivering instruction were chosen on convenience or cost, without regard to issues of student accessibility and privacy.</li> </ul>
<b>Access to Meals and Community Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Some educators have received appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) to ensure their safety and the safety of their students.</li> <li>✓ Meals continue to be served, either through pick-up points across the district or delivered via buses.</li> <li>✓ Schools are performing wellness checks over the phone for those students flagged as needing support.</li> <li>✓ Educators and school leaders have administered surveys to families using online, text messaging, and telephone formats to reach as many families as possible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Not all personnel preparing/distributing food and other resources have proper PPE.</li> <li>✓ Meals are served only if children are present and at certain times/certain locations. Some districts have an inadequate number of pick-up points, particularly in rural communities.</li> <li>✓ Districts did not ask what families needed; they assumed. In other districts, a survey was only available online and in English, limiting those who could respond.</li> <li>✓ Money for family engagement for families of color has been reallocated.</li> </ul>

# How Can the Country Pursue Education Justice to Grow from the Crisis?

**T**hese are uncertain times, and this situation raises unprecedented questions. Though educators are doing their best to address concerns as they arise, we still don't know enough about the future of this disease to be able to answer them all adequately.

Additionally, contexts across schools, districts, and states are vastly different from one another, so a one-size-fits-all approach will not fix all the problems educators, students, and families are facing.

What is unfortunate is that the effects are at times initially hidden, and those hidden effects will oftentimes manifest in the form of inequities. While there is much that educators and school leaders are still learning about the pandemic, having collective ideas to ensure the promise of education equity in a time of crisis is critical. This section presents ideas from LJS participants on how to promote equity starting now.



## Social/Emotional Considerations

While some districts have called for mandatory summer school and other districts have considered having students repeat the semester, educators, school leaders, and the community must be reminded that decisions need to be made while considering what makes the most sense for all parties involved—educators, students, and their families. It is important to not forget that everyone has experienced this pandemic differently. Before rushing to get back to “business as usual,” here are actions, according to LJS participants, that school leaders can implement now as the country begins to move forward:

- ✓ Build stronger connections with families;
- ✓ Shift focus to ensure trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning;<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Implement stronger wraparound services,<sup>2</sup> such as a mentor to support each family; and
- ✓ Rethink current assessment practices, such as standardized testing.

Many of these ideas dominated conversations with the LJS participants. While educators are eager to plan for instruction, they recognize that they must first consider what students are experiencing before they return to the school building.



## Digital Learning

Another area where inequity manifests is in digital spaces. With the quick move to online education, many districts have easily transitioned with students engaging online in similar manners as they did in person. Educators have been instructing students using technology such as videoconferencing and chat messaging to assist with academic assignments.

While this has been a smooth transition in some districts, in others, it has been a struggle, especially in underfunded districts and schools. This challenge of reliable access to high-speed broadband Internet and devices for individual students is where digital inequity lies. High-speed home Internet and digital devices are very common to many; however, there are still millions of homes without reliable and adequate Internet access and/or devices for every child. In what has become known as the homework gap, an estimated 17 percent of U.S. students do not have access to computers at home, and 18 percent do not have home access to broadband Internet.<sup>3</sup> Here are ideas from LJS member leaders on how to increase digital equity for students in schools:



- ✓ Provide quality high-speed broadband Internet access for every student who needs it;
- ✓ Implement a one-to-one device initiative for all students;
- ✓ Ensure that modifications and/or accommodations for students with special needs are continually provided, even when instruction is occurring digitally; and
- ✓ Recognize that all students come from different walks of life and delivery of distance and digital learning of some curricula may be overwhelming—specific needs of all students must be met, including differentiating for developmental appropriateness and language background.

## Educator Needs

In addition to caring for the emotional and instructional needs of students, it is also crucial to plan for the future of public schools as well. School leaders must continue to advocate for equity, not only for the needs of students but also for those of educators. Specifically, as it relates to educators, LJS participants suggested the following:

- ✓ Demonstrate compassion toward educators because they may also be experiencing trauma;
- ✓ Spend time to collaborate with colleagues and school leaders to plan for the reopening of schools, recognizing additional student needs due to the crisis; and
- ✓ Ensure that educators continue to receive full salary and healthcare benefits.

We need to work now to ensure that all educators and students are prepared to return to school buildings, both emotionally and academically. It is important to note that LJS participants made these recommendations with an eye toward racial and social justice.

# How Can the Country Pursue Education Justice in the Upcoming School Year?

**S**chool leaders, educators, and parents are concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic school building closures on the academic, social, emotional, and nutritional well-being of students. Although some learning loss is likely, the severity of COVID-19 learning loss will vary depending on students' access to learning opportunities during distance and digital learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic is enhancing inequities in our education systems and throughout society. Access and opportunity are more limited, and inequities are more exposed now than ever before. As schools plan for the next school year, there is an opportunity to ensure that all students, particularly those who are historically marginalized, receive caring, inclusive, safe, and equitable learning opportunities going forward. Over the course of recent months, LJS member leaders convened digitally to discuss how to make sure that equity is front and center as educators prepare for the next school year. Their suggestions fell into three major categories:

## Curricular Planning

- ✓ Allow educators to spend time in development teams discussing curricular changes and preparing for the next school year;
- ✓ Focus on depth, rather than breadth, in curriculum; and
- ✓ Create an equity plan with stated goals and objectives to ensure equitable learning opportunities for traditionally underserved students.

## Social/Emotional Supports

- ✓ Increase response to intervention and other programs that support students' social and emotional well-being;
- ✓ Provide wraparound services, such as those implemented in full-service community schools;
- ✓ Build stronger connections with families and communities to better equip them to support student learning; and
- ✓ Establish bridge programs for elementary, middle, and high school transitions.

## Policy Responses

- ✓ Maintain fair, clear, and consistent expectations across districts and within states;
- ✓ Consider suspending standardized testing that is not diagnostic in 2021-2022, and allow schools and educators to focus on learning loss and student social and emotional health needs;
- ✓ Continue to remedy the homework gap by providing access to digital devices and home broadband Internet to all students;
- ✓ Support families with interventions that reduce the cycle of poverty, such as universal early childhood education, school meals, and health care, particularly as families face increases in unemployment;
- ✓ Ensure that educators, including education support professionals, have adequate pay and healthcare benefits; and
- ✓ Maintain adequate funding for public education.

# Conclusion

The NEA has been working to ensure that our members' voices are heard as we work through this pandemic. The member leaders from the Leaders for Just Schools program are particularly equipped to promote equitable practices in schools across the country.

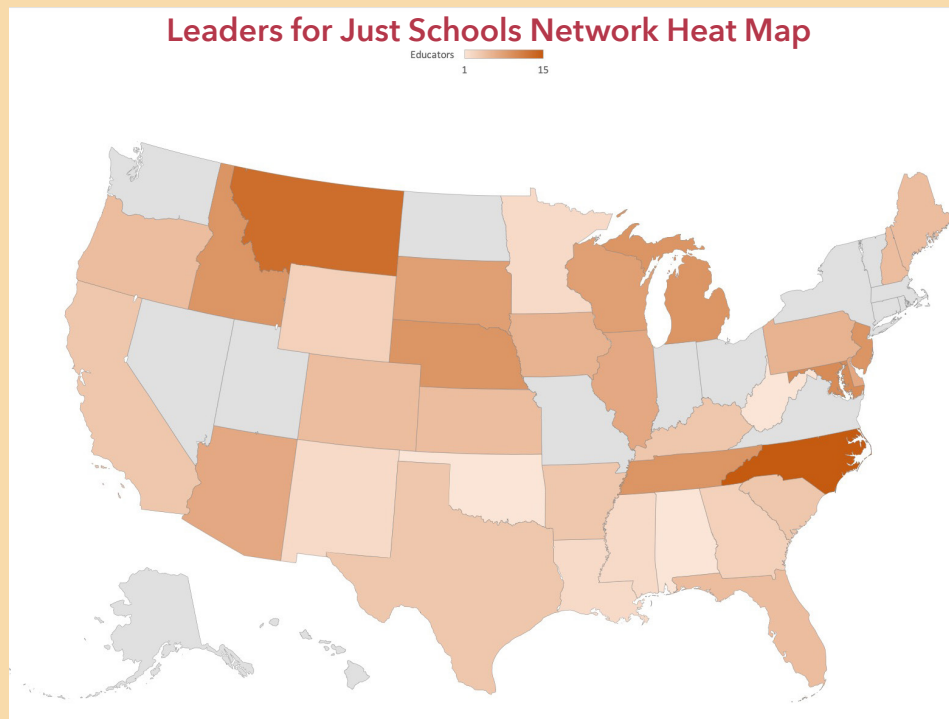
The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented amount of unique challenges that we will likely feel the effects of for years to come. To ensure that we continue to meet the needs of our public school stakeholders, we must begin to consider options to respond to the challenges that this crisis has created.

As we explore those options, we must also develop answers to questions that we have never had to answer before. There is still so much that we do not know; however, what we do know is that if we get answers to those questions through a lens of equity, not only will we create the best environments for teaching and learning, but we will also grow stronger and improve during the process.

## Endnotes

- 1 Social-Emotional Learning Should Be Priority During COVID-19 Crisis. (April 2020). *NEA Today*. Retrieved from [neatoday.org/2020/04/15/social-emotional-learning-during-covid/](https://neatoday.org/2020/04/15/social-emotional-learning-during-covid/).
- 2 Community Schools. (2019). NEA. Retrieved from [nea.org/home/66157.htm](https://nea.org/home/66157.htm).
- 3 As Schools Close, Educators Move Quickly to Assist Every Student. (March 2020). *NEA Today*. Retrieved from [neatoday.org/2020/03/19/with-so-many-unknowns-educators-strive-for-balance/](https://neatoday.org/2020/03/19/with-so-many-unknowns-educators-strive-for-balance/).

**Leaders for Just Schools** program participants are members of affiliates throughout the country; more than 200 LJS member leaders are leading this important equity work in 35 states throughout the country, and that number continues to grow.



If you are interested in getting involved, reach out to the NEA by emailing [essainfo@nea.org](mailto:essainfo@nea.org) to connect with an LJS member leader in your state who can contribute to these critical equity conversations and planning in the age of coronavirus.



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