



# COVID-19's impact on Latinx students

WHAT EDUCATION LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

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**L**atinx children and their families have been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought long-standing economic, health, and educational disparities to the forefront (López, Barajas-Gonzales et al., 2020).

Even before the pandemic, systemic

racial and social inequities meant that Latinx students had less access to high-quality instruction and teaching than white students, were tracked into less rigorous courses, were met with lower expectations, and ultimately experienced opportunity gaps that hindered educational and economic development (U.S. Department of

Education, 2021). The pandemic exacerbated these patterns (Fortuna et al., 2020).

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### HEALTH AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

COVID-19 illness has affected Latinx populations more than others. Latinx families make up 18.5% of the U.S. population but account for 29.5% of COVID-19 cases, and hospitalizations for Latinx are 4.6 times the rate of their white peers (NIHCM, 2020; Romano et al., 2021).

This is due in large part to disproportionate exposure to COVID-19 illness fueled by systemic racial and social inequities. For example, Latinx families are overrepresented in the essential workforce, which limits their ability to benefit from stay-at-home orders and increases their exposure to COVID-19.

Relatedly, financial hardship from the pandemic is higher among Latinx children and families. Compared to 33% of all U.S. adults, 49% of Latinx adults indicated that either they or someone in their household took a pay cut, lost their job, or both during the pandemic (NIHCM, 2020).

As a result, Latinx families experienced the largest increase in the child poverty rate during the COVID-19 pandemic — an increase of 4.2 percentage points — bringing the current Latinx child poverty rate to 27.3% (Chen & Thomson, 2021). This means that almost one out of every

three Latinx children in the U.S. lives in poverty.

Additionally, almost a third (29%) of Latinx families are experiencing three or more accompanying economic and health-related hardships such as unemployment, inability to pay rent or mortgage, food insecurity, physical health problems, symptoms of anxiety or depression, or lack of health insurance as a result of the pandemic (Padilla & Thompson, 2021).

The most economically vulnerable among them are unable to access key safety nets that could help buffer the chronic stress and mental health impacts of COVID-19. For example, many Latinx families were excluded from COVID-19 Economic Relief due to the immigration status of a household member, even though their children are U.S. citizens and entitled to these supports.

At the same time, the health and economic crises of the pandemic compounded resource disparities that already existed in schools serving Latinx children and other marginalized populations (Garcia & Weiss, 2017).

All of these stresses affect children's ability to learn, especially the most vulnerable children, because children with previous trauma or loss are at higher risk to show symptoms of traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, or other mental health problems after COVID-19 (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2018). Younger children are especially

### TO LEARN MORE

For a detailed review of the research described in this article, see *Addressing Inequities in Education: Considerations for Latinx Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19*, written by the authors for the Society for Research in Child Development's special Statement of the Evidence on the impact of COVID-19.

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vulnerable given their unique developmental needs (Osofsky et al., 2007).

### EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS

Other longstanding systemic disparities also put Latinx children at educational risk during the pandemic. Low-income Latinx children are often segregated into poor schools in low-resource communities. These communities had fewer resources to draw on when it became necessary to shift to remote learning than wealthier schools that were able to distribute computers, provide internet access, and offer other technology to students and families.

Low-income Latinx and Black children were disproportionately more likely to receive low-quality or no instruction during the COVID-19

pandemic, contributing to learning loss as a result of lack of access, limited home support for learning, and disengagement.

A large proportion of Latinx families have lower levels of formal schooling and struggle with reading in English (up to 56% in one study; López, Komaroff et al., 2020). As a result, Latinx families might have been unable to institute in-home teaching, help children with their schoolwork, or provide supplemental educational experiences during the implementation of distance learning (López, Barajas-Gonzales et al., 2020; PIQE, 2020; Sanchez et al., 2020).

Furthermore, about 30% of Latinx students are identified as English learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). School districts report having limited numbers of appropriately trained teachers to provide appropriate virtual instruction to English learners, with many schools employing only one English as a Second Language certified teacher (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), who was then expected to be in dozens of virtual classrooms each week. The gap had a particularly large impact on students with disabilities, who lost access to therapies, learning aids, and services necessary to support academic progress during the pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

As a result of the exacerbation of systemic racial and social inequities in schools, the average learning loss for Latinx children has been estimated at 9.2 months, and the learning loss for low-income children, of which Latinx children make up a significant percentage, has been estimated at 12.4 months (Dorn et al., 2020).

To address the lost instructional time during COVID, leaders might increase instructional time by extending the school year or day, providing one-on-one tutoring, and offering after-school programming (Sanchez et al., 2020). In addition, they can promote activities that foster healing and belonging for both students and educators.

## LEADERSHIP FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

As educators and school systems work together to address and allocate funding such as COVID relief funds to ameliorate the impact of COVID-19, they must understand that going back to business as usual would continue to place Latinx students and their families in a system designed to exclude them and exacerbate the opportunity gap. Achieving success for all students will take rethinking the way things have always been done and making adjustments.

The first step is for school leaders to prioritize and support ongoing professional learning to help teachers understand the experiences, strengths, and needs of Latinx students and families. Latinx children and families represent a heterogeneous group. Teachers and administrators should devote time to understand the uniqueness of Latinx families within their school community. This includes understanding their needs but also recognizing Latinx families' strengths that support their children's learning. This understanding underlies culturally responsive practice.

Professional learning should also help cultivate teachers' understanding of the relationship between systemic racial and social inequities and instructional and educational opportunities for Latinx students.

For example, immigration policies have a disproportionate impact on Latinx families, which often result in policing and deportations and prevent access to safety net services (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021). In addition, 3.7 million U.S. citizen or legal immigrant children living with unauthorized immigrant parents were rendered ineligible for federal COVID relief (Gelatt et al., 2021).

Such experiences increase children's anxiety and depression, impacting their ability to learn. Understanding these factors can help educators understand why their students may have low attendance, seem distracted

or disengaged, or lack the resources to participate fully.

Professional learning should build knowledge of and capacity for effective instructional practices for English learners. Effective instructional practices are critical to addressing their academic and language needs. Previous research has documented that teachers often feel unprepared to teach English learners and have little access to professional development on effective instructional practices, especially those around digital learning.

## STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC CHANGES

School leaders can allocate COVID relief funds as well as other funding to take steps to address the systemic racial and social inequities that negatively impact Latinx children. Here are a few of the possibilities.

Implementing dual language instructional models and supporting oral language development builds on the linguistic assets of Latinx students and families so that students can access grade-level content and engage in rich discussion and processing of that content. These strategies are effective practices to address the opportunity gap among Latinx students, specifically those classified as English learners (NASEM, 2017).

Hiring and supporting bilingual/bicultural staff, especially trained community members, can improve direct communication between teachers, school, and parents (Sanchez et al., 2020). These include consistent translation of documents to be available in families' home languages as well as consistent interpretation during school events.

Another step is to compensate teachers and staff for the additional work with Latinx community. This is specifically important for Latinx teachers and staff who often take on additional work to address the needs of Latinx families.

School leaders also play an important role in securing resources to

meet students' comprehensive needs. This should include evidence-based, culturally and linguistically appropriate, trauma-informed school-based mental health services for students, educators, administrators, and staff (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

It should also include access to technology. Computer hardware and reliable internet access will continue to be an essential piece of learning even as students return to in-person learning, and currently, too many Latinx students lack those resources (PIQE, 2020; Sanchez et al., 2020). School leaders can be advocates and liaisons who leverage national, state, and local resources to meet these needs.

### CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES

Too often, Latinx families feel alienated from schools, especially when teachers and leaders do not speak their home language or share aspects of their culture. Strong school-family

partnerships do not happen by accident. They are built through intentional, sustained effort and a willingness to listen and learn.

One important step is to involve Latinx families in decision-making. School leaders can survey Latinx families in multiple languages (e.g. indigenous languages) to better understand their strengths, needs, and create convenient and authentic opportunities for them to engage in dialogue, and center their voices by providing spaces for them to serve in leadership roles that have an influence on school- and system-level decisions.

### A TIME FOR CHANGE

Latinx children and their families have long experienced restricted access to resources that support their economic well-being, education, and health, and those inequities have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Although the connection between

systemic racial and social inequities and access to high-quality health services is widely recognized, the explicit acknowledgment of the impact of those inequities on educational access is less often acknowledged (Kohli et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). School leaders can change that by working together with teachers and other colleagues to make meaningful change for Latinx students.

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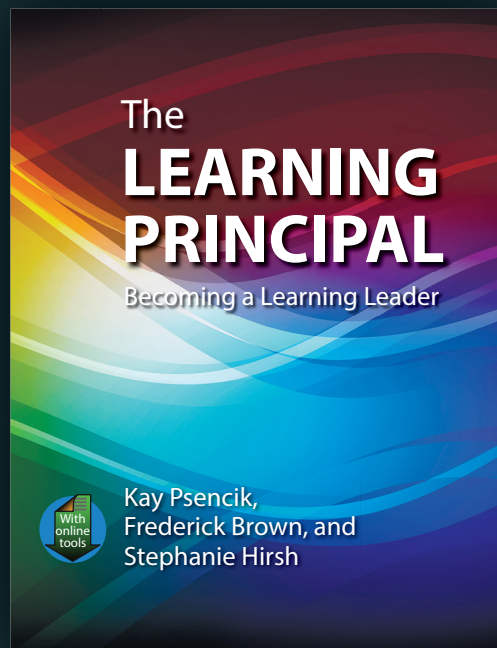
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