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SCHOOL CLOSURE AND ENGLISH LEARNERS

A Review of COVID-19 Operations Written Reports



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Finally, Martha Hernandez, Executive Director of Californians Together, Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, Strategic Advisor to Californians Together, Cristal Zeas, Californians Together Administrative Assistant, and Dr. Magaly Lavadenz and Dr. Elvira Armas of the Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University, have provided invaluable support on the process for the review and analysis of the COVID-19 written reports.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Conor P. Williams is a fellow at the Century Foundation, a progressive think tank. He is also a member of the Children's Equity Project and the National Conference of State Legislatures' State Policy and Research for Early Education (SPREE) Working Group. Williams' research largely focuses on policies affecting the educational opportunities available to English learners and children of immigrants. *Find him on Twitter:* @ConorPWilliams.

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Xilonin Cruz-Gonzalez is Deputy Director for Californians Together, leading the policy team and managing special initiatives. A native Californian, she is very proud to be both a fifth-generation Azusa, CA resident and the daughter of a Mexican immigrant. She has served on the Azusa USD Board of Education since 2001 and, in that capacity, is also currently serving as the President of California School Boards Association. *Find her on Twitter:* @xilonin.

Manuel Buenrostro is a Policy Associate for Californians Together where he manages research, policy, and advocacy projects as part of the policy team. He is a native Californian, proud son of Mexican immigrants, and a first generation college graduate. He has extensive experience in education ranging from the classroom to state and national policy development. *Find him on Twitter:* @BuenrostroManny.



SCHOOL CLOSURE AND ENGLISH LEARNERS

A Review of COVID-19 Operations Written Reports

Author: Conor Williams with contributions from Xilonin Cruz-Gonzalez and Manuel Buenrostro

COVID-19 hit California like a bolt from the blue. No one could predict the size and scope of the threat it posed until too late, and public institutions—especially schools—were largely left scrambling to sketch hasty plans to continue their operations. But as California approaches half a year of lockdowns, school closures, and economic restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to cease treating it as a crisis to be coped with and begin treating it as a situation to be managed.

Fortunately, in the case of schools, there are records for public analysis. On April 22, 2020, as it became clear that the pandemic would not permit schools to rapidly return to in-person instruction, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed [Executive Order N-56-20](#) requiring school districts to produce written reports outlining how they were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. These may be the clearest accounts of how districts managed school closures and the quality of education many students received.

Better mid- and long-term planning begins with an assessment of the chaotic spring. How well did schools respond in the moment? What worked well, what was left out then—and how can schools do better in the upcoming school year?

To help answer these questions, Californians Together launched a collaborative review process of 79 California school districts' COVID-19 Operations Written Reports [\[template\]](#). These documents offer a window into local districts' thinking and can serve as a guide for future improvement.

The analysis focused on how well these plans addressed the needs of English learners (ELs), [who appear to have been uniquely marginalized in schools' spring distance learning offerings](#). California public schools cannot succeed without supporting these students: fully [44 percent of California's school-aged children speak a non-English language at home](#). These students have historically faced systemic biases and opportunity gaps [throughout the state's public education system](#). If local education leaders do not prioritize EL students' needs now, amidst a historically unprecedented crisis, they are ensuring that these opportunity gaps will further widen.

Six key indicators were identified for measuring how well schools adjusted to serve ELs when campuses closed in the spring:

- 1 Designated and Integrated English Language Development (ELD):** California law requires that schools provide all ELs with Designated and Integrated ELD. The pandemic does not excuse schools from meeting that requirement. In each case, how well each local COVID-19 report explained the district's plans to offer ELD services was explored.
- 2 Live Interactive Instruction:** ELs thrive when they have frequent opportunities to develop their language skills through conversations with peers and teachers. This emerging oral language proficiency serves as a foundation for their development of written and academic language proficiencies. To that end, how well each local COVID-19 report articulated and explained the live instructional experiences schools made available for their EL students was explored.
- 3 Bridging the Digital Divide:** ELs cannot succeed in distance learning models that they cannot access. Therefore, how well each local COVID-19 report outlined efforts to ensure that all students had access to technology devices as well as reliable internet connectivity was explored.
- 4 Family Collaboration:** Families are critical to ELs' success during normal times. This is only heightened during the pandemic, when schooling is happening in the home with families—no longer in the classroom with teachers. As such, how well each local COVID-19 report described efforts not only to communicate but also to partner with families in the learning process was explored.
- 5 Social-Emotional Support:** Many children have struggled with anxiety and stress during the pandemic. Some have suffered significant trauma. Most will be returning to the fall after abnormal conditions of social isolation. These circumstances make it critical that schools focus on building relationships and supporting students' social-emotional development. So how each local COVID-19 report addressed students' social-emotional needs was explored.
- 6 Early Childhood Education (ECE):** Early childhood education learning opportunities are powerful ways to accelerate dual language learners' linguistic and academic development. These programs are also particularly difficult to remake in distance or hybrid learning models. So how well each local COVID-19 report explained how educators would make early learning accessible during the pandemic was explored.

Plans were evaluated over a one week period by over thirty volunteers, placed into teams of at least two people to calibrate scoring. Each plan was rated on a four-point rating scale (see Appendix A). The findings and some best practices for each indicator follow.

THE 79 SCHOOL DISTRICTS REPRESENT:

44%
of English Learners

35%
of students

26 of 58
counties in California

Districts were selected based on their total number of ELs, percentage of ELs, the achievement of ELs in the 2018-19 CAASPP assessment in English language arts or mathematics (includes both high-achieving and low-achieving districts), districts included in prior LCAP analysis, or recommendations. Districts also include a mix of small, medium, and large districts and cover all grade spans (including unified, elementary, and high school districts).

1 DESIGNATED AND INTEGRATED ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT



California law mandates that schools must provide ELs access to Designated and Integrated English Language Development supports. These are core elements of the state’s approach to advancing ELs’ linguistic and academic development. During the pandemic, state law was updated ([SB 98](#)) to clarify that these services are not optional in distance learning models in the upcoming school year. School campuses may be closed, but that does not excuse education leaders from offering ELs the support they are legally entitled to receive.

The analysis of districts’ COVID-19 written reports found that, while 33 percent of plans offered detailed accounts of how educators offered integrated and designated ELD, 39 percent of plans offered minimal or no explanation about providing ELs with these services.

This is deeply concerning, given that these reports do not constitute the actual provision of ELD services, just an outline of how it was done. In other words, in the districts with the largest number and/or largest percentage of ELs, nearly four in ten California districts provided little to no information about what they did to ensure that ELs received their legally-mandated learning opportunities. And in the remaining districts, those which provided some account of having offered ELD programming, it is unclear how accessible or well-attended these classes were, let alone of what quality. Indeed, [a spring survey from the Parent Institute for Quality Education found that 45 percent of ELs’ families](#) reported that their students were not receiving the supports they needed from schools.

Sadly, this aligns with other data on schools’ COVID-19 responses in the spring. [In a spring survey of over 650 California educators](#), a majority indicated that fewer than half of their ELs were regularly participating in distance learning in the first place. What’s more, just 55 percent of respondents reported that their schools were offering Designated ELD online during distance learning.

BEST PRACTICES

Districts should learn from standouts like [Alhambra USD](#), which offered differentiated ELD instruction in breakout small group rooms on Zoom video calls. Similarly, [Garden Grove USD](#) offered ELs “structured oral language practice, as well as...opportunities to process new learning through structured writing prompts with academic language and sentence frames.”

2 LIVE INTERACTIVE INSTRUCTION



ELs advance their linguistic development through regular conversations with peers and teachers.

As such, oral language development is foundational for their long-term academic success. These students need live social and academic interactions with people they care about to succeed. Recorded videos of lessons and/or interactive online learning materials cannot replace live interactive instruction for this purpose.

California schools struggled to provide students with this sort of reliable connection in the spring. While California law [\[SB 98\]](#) now requires that they include “daily live interaction...for purposes of instruction, progress monitoring, and maintaining school connectedness” in the upcoming year, many districts did not guarantee daily live interaction with teachers, let alone on a weekly basis. The lack of district guidelines for daily live interaction raises an equity concern for students since their access becomes dependent on implementation by their teacher or school. This also unfairly impacts teachers who may be carrying this extra responsibility without the support and professional development from the district.

Over half (56 percent) of districts’ COVID-19 written reports revealed little to no evidence that schools regularly delivered live instruction to their students. Meanwhile, 85 percent of districts offered no evidence that they provided a guaranteed minimum number of minutes of live instruction for their students each day or week. Only 12 out of 79 districts guaranteed daily live interaction in the spring.

This also echoes [data from a spring survey of educators](#), in which nearly eight in ten respondents said that their EL students were receiving an average of fewer than three hours of weekly live instruction.

BEST PRACTICES

Fortunately, there was evidence that some districts were stepping up to provide all students with regular access to live instruction. In order to support “the continuance of language development” for ELs, [Parlier USD](#) scheduled “face to face virtual chats three days a week for teachers to speak with, hear and see students,” as well as “small group instruction meetings were created for students needing additional support in language acquisition.” The district also outlined detailed schedules for ELD and academic instruction.

3 BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



In distance learning models, access to technology devices and internet connectivity is akin to access to school buildings. Without a computer or tablet and reliable internet access, students generally cannot log on for video calls or engage with key online learning materials.

There is significant evidence that ELs disproportionately suffer from the digital divide. As such, districts must ensure that all students have a digital device and internet service to support virtual instruction with additional follow up to ensure access for ELs. It is not enough to provide devices without connectivity, or connectivity without devices, or one digital device per household. In most cases, equitable access to distance learning means providing 1:1 device access per student.

Too many California schools have not yet cleared this basic equity of access hurdle in their distance learning approaches. In the analysis of the COVID-19 written reports, 97 percent of districts at least mentioned addressing access to devices and internet. However, just half included following up with students to confirm access, and only one in four described a comprehensive, sustained effort to ensure access for all students.

BEST PRACTICES

Districts can learn from Coachella Valley USD, which distributed thousands of tablets and mobile hotspots, and also followed up with a team of “EL Mentors,” who made “ongoing contact with their mentees/parents to ensure students were connecting with their classroom teachers, had electronic devices, and were making progress with their classwork.”

4 FAMILY COLLABORATION



Research suggests that engagement with ELs’ families is critical to these students’ success during normal times. This is even more true under current public health conditions, which makes it more challenging for educators to reach students for in-person instruction. [Families are uniquely valuable](#) in a moment when they are the only people who are reliably able to work with ELs directly and in person.

As such, California districts should consider the specific needs of EL families in their partnership and engagement plans. First, districts must ensure that all communications about distance learning and COVID-19 are translated into the students’ home languages. They must also seek opportunities to partner with families to support the education of their children at home. Critically, this isn’t just a matter of sending home information. It also must include active family engagement in district and school decision-making.

Unfortunately, the analysis found that 28 percent of districts offered no evidence that they translated communications with ELs’ families. Another 30 percent mentioned translating communications, but offered no evidence of further engagement. Nearly two in three districts (65 percent) did not provide evidence of engaging families in decision-making.

This matches data from the Parent Institute for Quality Education, [whose spring survey found that around one-third of families did not understand](#) the instructions schools sent about distance learning.

BEST PRACTICES

Encouraging, however, were examples like [Centinela Valley Union HSD](#), where educators and staff tried to call each student each day, and “site administrators assigned Spanish speaking staff and recruited additional teachers and staff for other languages (Vietnamese, Arabic, etc).” Similarly, in [Elk Grove USD](#), parent liaisons “contacted families to ensure they had access to community resources and resources for distance learning,” and teachers reached out to families twice a week.

5 SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORT



The pandemic didn't only—or even primarily—disrupt students' academic development.

It also imposed an unprecedented degree of social isolation and widespread stress for many children. ELs' families appear to be disproportionately struggling with [food](#) insecurity and other challenges during the lockdown.

Children will return to schooling this fall—whether online, on campus, or some hybrid of the two—carrying significant baggage from these experiences. Addressing students' social and emotional development—and their mental well-being—must be a primary focus for schools this fall, particularly in the case of ELs. While schools will be understandably concerned about providing intensive academic supports for students who were not significantly engaged in distance learning in the spring, they cannot skip past the work of addressing students' social-emotional needs.

The analysis found that nearly three-quarters of districts made minimal or no reference to social-emotional supports in their COVID-19 written reports.

BEST PRACTICES

Districts can learn from examples like [Williams USD](#), which reported that its “teachers are using integrated units in their playlists, targeting grade-level standards, embedding activities to support socio-emotional learning and including SEAL (GLAD) strategies that are online friendly.” [Fresno USD](#) established a COVID-19 Call Center to field community questions in English, Spanish, and Hmong. It also relied on its team of Clinical School Social Workers to check in on students and connect them with counseling and other services as needed.

6 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION¹



Distance learning is an inadequate replacement for in-person school for educators and students in any setting. But it's [particularly challenging in the early years](#), when children need significant support from adults to engage with—and remain focused on—distance learning.

[Research suggests](#) that young ELs, known as dual language learners (DLLs), [uniquely benefit](#) from [access to early childhood learning](#). Districts should ensure that all children continue to have access to early learning opportunities and that such opportunities consider the needs of DLLs.

And yet, the analysis found that 41 percent of districts did not even mention early childhood learning. Only four of the 66 districts mentioned early childhood learning and DLLs together.

BEST PRACTICES

Those districts that did mention DLLs and early learning in their COVID-19 written reports should serve as guides for the rest of the state. [Earlimart ESD](#) explained that its transitional kindergarten teachers received professional development for using the Sobrato Early Academic Learning (SEAL) approach, which supports DLLs' linguistic and academic development. And [Oakland USD](#) outlined "a comprehensive at-home distance learning packet" built around routines, play, and academic experiences. "For preschool-aged children," OUSD reported, "educators also continue to facilitate Big Day PreK, the District's core curriculum, remotely."

¹ High school districts were excluded for the analysis of Early Childhood Education, and a total of 66 elementary and unified school districts were analyzed.

CONCLUSION

Learning from the Spring to Build a Better Fall for ELs

Districts' COVID-19 written reports from the spring offer a mixed bag.

While there are clear bright spots, in far too many districts, the pandemic appears to have cost ELs their chances to equitably connect with learning opportunities. Indeed, it is worth noting that the situation was probably even bleaker in the spring than these reports suggest. These reports reflect what districts promised they would do, however, implementation often varies and is a factor not measured in this report.

In the spring, these challenges were understandable—if unfortunate—given that schools closed without warning or planning. This cannot be an excuse as the fall approaches. Nothing about this fall will be normal. However schools operate this academic year, they must include and support ELs in their instructional planning—and implementation.

As it relates to planning for school re-openings, it is clear that schools must:

- ✓ *Provide ELs with the English language development services that are mandated under California law;*
- ✓ *Give ELs ample time to interact with their teachers and classmates so that they can continue to develop language skills that will support their long-term academic development;*
- ✓ *Distribute the technology necessary to make it possible for these students to regularly participate in distance learning;*
- ✓ *Work intentionally and constructively with ELs' families in languages that they understand with a focus on supporting instruction;*
- ✓ *Help educators monitor and understand EL children's social-emotional health from the earliest years through graduation and provide supports in and outside of the classroom; and*
- ✓ *Engage young Dual Language Learners in preschool and TK as an integral component of the distance learning plan.*

School and district leaders should take to heart the lessons of the spring—from both their own experiences and those of others. It is important to remember that despite the challenges highlighted here, there were examples of excellence and innovation that should be applauded. Districts can learn from these challenges and examples to develop stronger plans to support EL success in the Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans for the new school year and in navigating future crises.

APPENDIX A

Rating Scales



1 Designated and Integrated English Language Development

NONE-1	MINIMAL-2	SOME-3	STRONG-4
No mention of ELD.	Mentions ELD in general but does not provide specific language about how it was provided.	Mentions designated ELD with specific language about how it was provided.	Mentions both integrated and designated ELD with specific language about how it was provided.

2 Live Interactive Instruction

NONE-1	MINIMAL-2	SOME-3	STRONG-4
No mention of live interaction.	Mentions live interaction with students.	Mentions live interaction with students and synchronous instruction.	Mentions live interaction with students and synchronous instruction specific for ELs.
2b. Mentions a minimal amount of guaranteed instructional minutes? (Yes/No)			

3 Bridging the Digital Divide

NONE-1	MINIMAL-2	SOME-3	STRONG-4
No mention of provision of devices and internet services.	Mentions the provision of devices and internet services for some students or grade levels.	Mentions the provision of devices and internet services for every student with some follow up.	Mentions the provision of devices and internet services for every student with follow up that ensures that all students have access.

4 Family Collaboration

NONE-1	MINIMAL-2	SOME-3	STRONG-4
No communication with evidence of translations.	Communication to families with translations.	Communication to families with translations and partnership opportunities to support instruction at home.	Communication to families with translations and partnership opportunities to support instruction at home, including considerations for EL families.
4b. Mentions strategies to engage families in decision-making? (Yes/No)			

5 Social-Emotional Support

NONE-1	MINIMAL-2	SOME-3	STRONG-4
No mention of social-emotional supports.	Mentions social-emotional supports.	Mentions social-emotional supports that are accessible to students and with considerations for ELs.	Mentions social-emotional supports and integration of social-emotional learning into instruction that are accessible to all students and with considerations for ELs.

6 Early Childhood Education

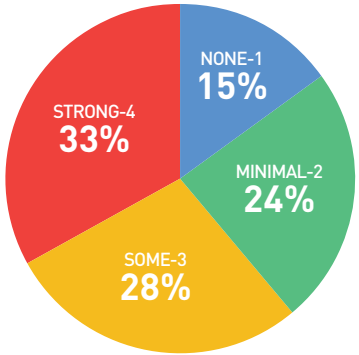
NONE-1	MINIMAL-2	SOME-3	STRONG-4
No mention of early childhood learning.	Mentions early childhood learning.	Mentions early childhood learning with evidence of support.	Mentions early childhood learning with evidence of support specific to DLLs.

APPENDIX B

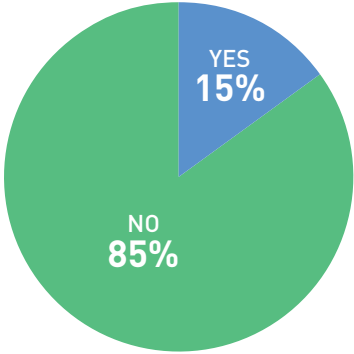
Summary of Data



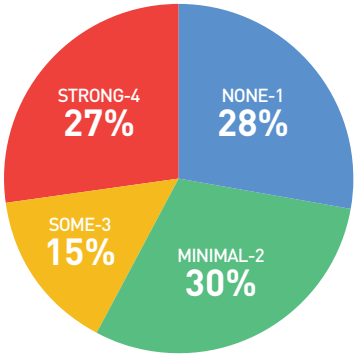
1 Designated and Integrated ELD



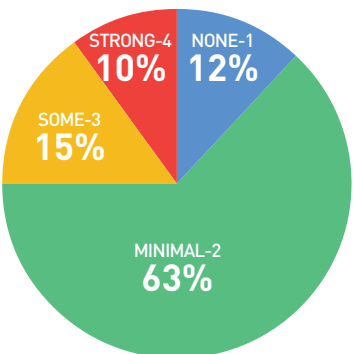
2b Minimal Instructional Minutes



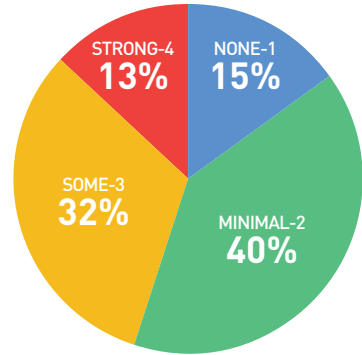
4 Family Collaboration



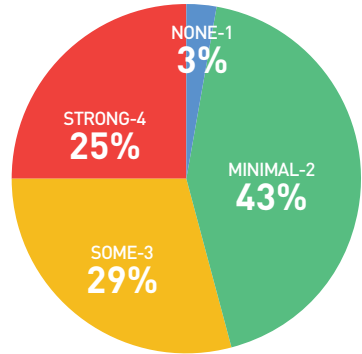
5 Social-Emotional Support



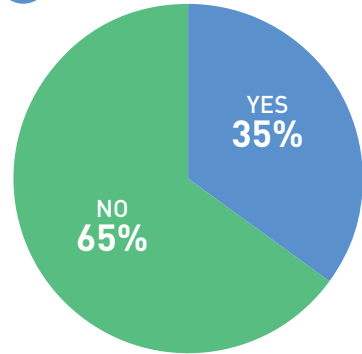
2 Live Interactive Instruction



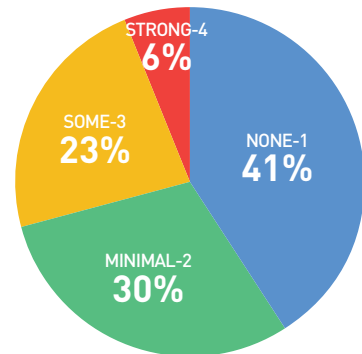
3 Bridging the Digital Divide



4b Decision-Making



6 Early Childhood Education



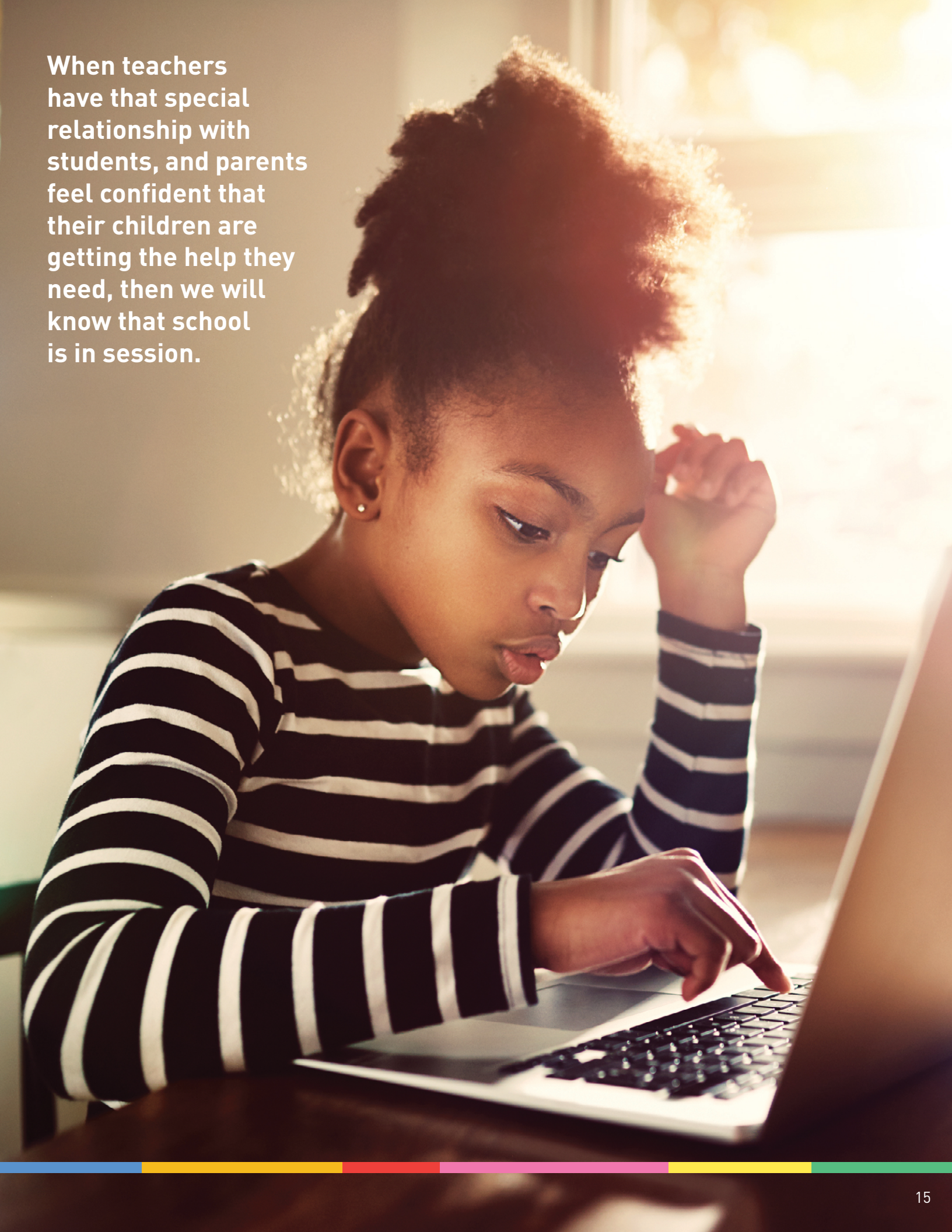
APPENDIX C

COVID-19 Operation Written Reports Volunteer Readers



Juan Alvarado, Oakley Union Elementary School District
Sophia Angeles, University of California, Los Angeles
Elvira Armas, Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University
Ruth Barajas, Californians Together
Manuel Buenrostro, Californians Together
Jennifer Cano, Alliance for a Better Community
Carolyn Crolotte, Early Edge California
Xilonin Cruz-Gonzalez, Californians Together
Guadalupe Diaz, Sobrato Early Academic Learning
Junhee Doh, Advancement Project California
Nikki Dominguez, Asian Americans Advancing Justice
Maria Gomez, Franklin-McKinley School District
Martha Hernandez, Californians Together
Consuelo Hernandez Williams, Ventura County Office of Education
Carla Herrera, Sobrato Early Academic Learning BTPDP
Elizabeth Jimenez, Val Verde Unified School District
Lorie Johnson, Mount Diablo Unified School District
Magaly Lavadenz, Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University
Echo Lee, Ventura County Office of Education
Claudia Lockwood, California Association for Bilingual Education
Martha Martinez, Sobrato Early Academic Language
Veronica McLane, Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University
Washington Navarette, Unidos US
Berenice Onofre, Latino-PEMA
Francisco Ortiz, United Teachers of Richmond; California Teachers Association
Feliza Ortiz-Lincon, Unidos US
Gisela O'Brien, Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University
Martha Quadros, San Juan Unified School District
Lillie Ruvalcaba, Mountain View School District
Peter Schilla, Californians Together
Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, Californians Together
Lilia Torres-Cooper, Whittier Union High School District
Alejandra Valencia, Orange County Department of Education
Leni Wolfe, Education Trust-West
Cristal Zeas, Californians Together

When teachers have that special relationship with students, and parents feel confident that their children are getting the help they need, then we will know that school is in session.





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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Californians Together
525 East Seventh Street, Suite 203
Long Beach, CA 90813
562-983-1333
info@californianstogether.org
www.californianstogether.org

