

COMMUNITY LEARNING HUBS:

Municipal Leadership to Support Education Requires Collective Action

The coronavirus pandemic has impacted virtually every facet of American life. Since March 2020, cities, towns, and villages nationwide have permanently lost 110,000 small businesses, more than 6 million people have been diagnosed with COVID-19, 47 percent of residents are unemployed, and millions of children and youth have not had in-person instruction since schools closed. While efforts to mitigate the spread and impact of COVID-19 varies across municipalities, the role of city officials has remained the same: to protect and serve people who call their community “home”. Creating Community Learning Hubs is an emerging solution to do exactly that.

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Background

From setting up Grab & Go meal sites and Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) programs to address food insecurity to passing eviction moratoriums and rent stabilization laws, cities, towns, and villages are pulling out all the stops to address the emerging needs of residents. COVID-19 has exposed a safety net that is not only frayed, but has exacerbated systemic inequities, and our education system is not immune.

The pandemic forced widespread school closures in an unprecedented disruption to K-12 schooling, impacting almost 55.1 million students. In the weeks and months that followed, school and local leaders struggled to reach out to students and families to reconnect, assess their transition to distance learning, and address the growing list of unmet needs.

Since schools closed, many city leaders across the country have leveraged their network of resources to be nimble and responsive to their community’s needs. With economic devastation impacting small and large cities alike, local leaders are rejecting siloed, narrowly defined, one-size-fits-all strategies and are adopting a collective action approach guided by community priorities, diversity, and culture.

Now, with growing calls to reopen schools, 2020-21 school plans will require a new level of coordinated interventions that coalesce existing local resources to strengthen learning opportunities and support the needs of youth, families, and educators - inside school classrooms and outside of school buildings, throughout the community.

This level of coordination is centrally located at the local level where municipal leaders and school districts are uniquely in tune to the needs of the community and share a vested interest to establish and pave a vision forward. From the Redwood Forest in Crescent City, California to the streets of Ferguson, Missouri; the priorities for city leaders may differ, but the vision is the same: to provide an educational, economic, and civic anchor for children of all ages and their families.

The challenges that lay ahead are complex and require continued courage and creativity from city leaders. This document presents a set of recommendations and an opportunity for mayors, councilmembers, and other elected officials to consider as they respond to the challenges of today and chart a path to rebuilding a better, healthier, resilient, and more responsive community for all.

Communities as Learning Hubs

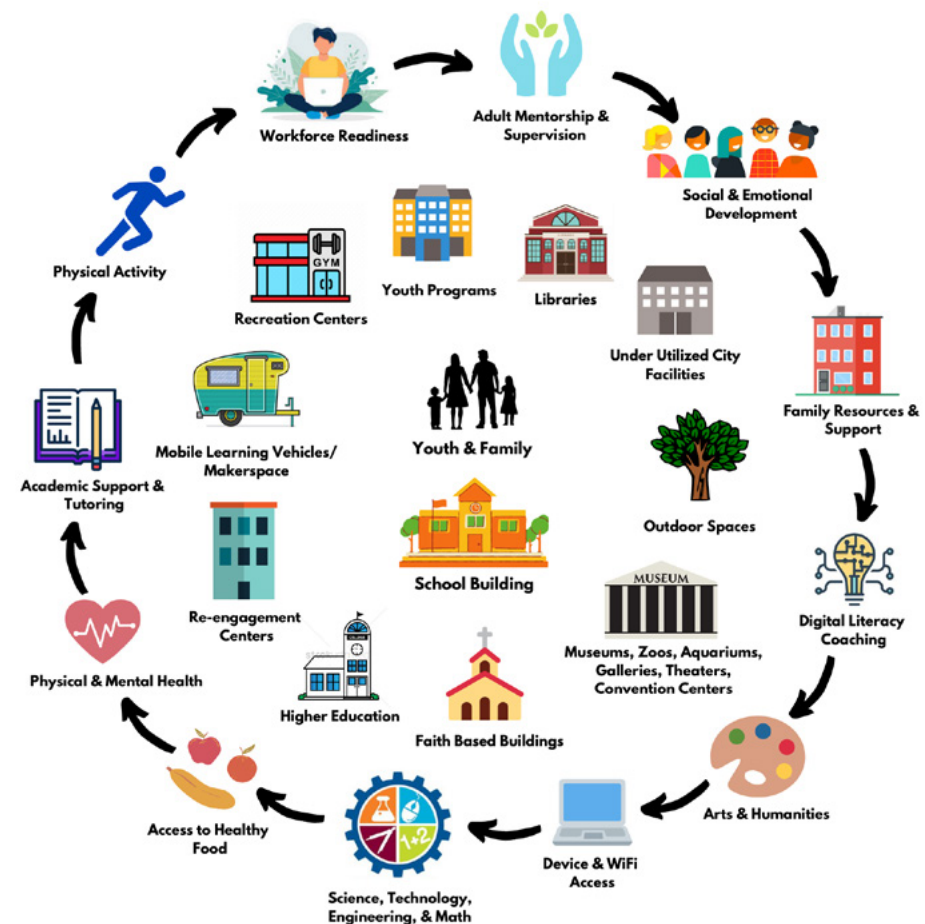
As the coronavirus pandemic continues, education and local leaders must balance a myriad of challenges to deliver the promise of a quality education for all children and families – in person, online, or in a hybrid approach. The 2020-2021 reopening school plans will need to consider the growing public health concerns; disparate access to computers and high speed internet connectivity; safe childcare and youth supervision; places to learn, catch up and keep up; equity concerns regarding privately funded “pandemic learning pods;” and student and family basic needs insecurities. These issues are layered on top of significant historic problems that have created deep systemic inequities in the first place.

Schools alone cannot solve these challenges, and they should not have to. This is a community-wide challenge that requires community-wide solutions. Mayors, councilmembers, and other local elected officials can leverage their leadership, bully pulpit, and convening authority to call upon community and faith based organizations, municipal agencies, the private sector, and philanthropic partners to help ensure what

has been historically true – that learning can and does happen in a variety of settings across communities. Amid COVID-19, partnerships between municipal leaders and the community are even more critical to provide access to technology and internet for distance learning, safe and quiet places to study, adult mentorship and tutoring, as well as the comprehensive wrap-around services that youth and families need to be successful. These are referred to as Community Learning Hubs.

Community Learning Hubs are not a new idea for municipal leaders. Cities such as Wylie, Texas have utilized libraries to serve as community hubs to provide economic and education services to residents while during this pandemic, the City of San Francisco, California announced that they would utilize 40 city recreation centers, libraries, and other local non-profits to serve as Community Learning Hubs to provide digital access, education support, meals, and enrichment services to support 6,000 low-income students who need additional support and adult supervision.

While Community Learning Hubs are constructed at the local level to serve residents – mirroring and/or augmenting the learning day - they will require a renewed commitment from community partners to strengthen the collective action approach in service of youth and families, especially those most vulnerable.



Community Learning Hubs can:

- ▶ **Collect Data to Determine Neighborhood-Specific Needs** to target unique, cultural, and diverse supports and resources to young people and their families in the short term and inform strategies for local rebuilding and recovery in the long term.
- ▶ **Leverage Local Facilities, Staff Expertise, and Community Resources** to design and coordinate services to support the needs of the community.
- ▶ **Prioritize Health & Safety Concerns** using the latest information on the virus to develop solutions tailored to localities' unique needs.
- ▶ **Address Systemic Inequities** by providing the most vulnerable populations with the additional support services that they will need to be successful inside and outside the classroom.
- ▶ **Provide Comprehensive Wraparound Supports** to address the holistic needs of children, youth, and families from food and housing insecurity, mental health and trauma informed care services, childcare/ youth supervision, to social-emotional development opportunities.

This document outlines steps municipal leaders can consider when coordinating community resources and developing partnerships in support of Community Learning Hubs:

NOTE: THESE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE NOT PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDELINES.

1 GETTING STARTED

This type of robust effort demands a full range of stakeholders that can commit to collaborating intentionally and intensively toward the goal of supporting children, youth, and families during this time of public health and economic crisis, disruption in education, and beyond. While many community and faith-based organizations have stepped up and transitioned to provide accessible virtual or socially distant in-person learning opportunities for children, youth, and families during the crisis, additional coordination and support is needed to address the growing list of resources and needs in communities. City leaders can serve as the conveners, leveraging the knowledge, capacities, and resources of all sectors in collaboration, especially municipal facilities, and staff. The composition of this cross-sector partnership will vary by locality with some pulling from existing working groups, taskforces, or intermediaries. Below are some action steps to consider:

- ▶ Convene municipal officials and school district leaders to consider strategies that promote cross-sector partnership in support of school district plans, including the Community Learning Hub model.
 - ▶ Invite municipal department leaders from Parks and Recreation, Libraries, Museum, Arts and Culture, Public Works, Environmental Health, Health and Human Services, Workforce Development, Police, Fire and EMS, in addition to county and state partners, public health experts, coalitions, afterschool and summer learning programs, [Statewide Afterschool Networks](#), YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs, community and faith-based organizations, representatives from large civic, cultural, and STEM/STEAM associations, organizations providing basic needs, private sector business and industry leaders, Chambers of Commerce, philanthropic entities, institutions of higher education, parents, and youth to seek support for this model.
 - ▶ Leverage cross-sector partners to identify immediate needs of children, youth, and families, map out geographic areas of high need, define mission and vision, determine the resources and capacity each partner can contribute, and assign roles that each partner may play to establish these Learning Hubs.
 - ▶ Review existing school reopening plans and adjust in anticipation of potential COVID-19 outbreaks, utilizing the Community Learning Hubs as a resource. In some cases, the Community Learning Hub model may be used from the beginning of the school year while in other cases it may be implemented throughout the academic year.
 - ▶ Consider action steps from the ASPEN Institute's new tool: [How Governors and Mayors Can Support Schools So Schools Can Support Students](#)
- ▶ Develop shared data agreements to facilitate needs-based assessment, streamline communication, and to avoid duplication.
- ▶ Seek opportunities to assign a liaison from the Community Learning Hub partnership to a state/county-led school reopening taskforce and/or public health commission to ensure reciprocal information sharing between local leaders to state policymakers.

2 HEALTH & SAFETY

With calls to reopen school underway and COVID-19 rates on the rise in many states, municipal leaders can design Community Learning Hubs that mirror/augment school plans as well as leverage community partners and resources to control the spread of the coronavirus throughout the community. In communities that are beginning their school year with primarily virtual learning or hybrid approaches, Community Learning Hubs can serve as digital access centers for underserved youth and their families in addition to places that provide tutoring, educational support, and adult supervision for young people to complete their coursework. In places that are ready to reopen schools safely, Community Learning Hubs could use community facilities to support smaller groups of children and youth with the ability to physically distance and create “cohorts”.

As communities across the country continue to monitor the spread of COVID-19, the utmost consideration must be given to the health and safety of residents and service providers. Below are some action steps to consider when designing Learning Hubs:

- ▶ Discuss the public health impact of COVID-19 in the community – this can be done in consultation with the public health experts serving as part of the cross-sector partnership.
- ▶ Use data to identify potential hotbeds and/ or areas that will require additional support to contain the virus by leveraging community partners and their resources to determine what testing, contacting tracing, and necessary precautions need to be put in place in case of an outbreak: [NLC, City, County, and Corporate Support for COVID Testing](#) and Contact Tracing outlines steps to suppress the spread.
- ▶ Identify alternative facilities in the community that can be used to create small groups of “[cohorting](#),” while reducing occupancy, especially in school districts with over-crowded schools.
 - ▶ Ex. City recreation or community and cultural centers, libraries, [places of worship](#), higher education institutions, Makers Spaces, museums, galleries, parks, senior centers, Reengagement Centers, afterschool/ summer learning facilities.
- ▶ Ensure the same care and caution when selecting alternative facilities to maintain healthy environments and operations, including assessing ventilation, room for physical distance, sanitation, access to water, etc. Local leaders may refer to CDC’s [Considerations for Schools](#) for the guiding principles to strengthen support and containment.

- ▶ Utilize outdoor spaces when possible as outdoor transmission of the virus is known to be much lower. Local leaders may refer to Green Schoolyards America’s [Official Guidance and Policies](#) page to design Outdoor Learning experiences.
- ▶ Pursue bulk purchases of sanitary supplies and equipment by drawing from monetary resources of each individual agency, organization, and/or pursue joint grant opportunities with philanthropy.
- ▶ Identify a plan for when someone gets sick, particularly how to leverage the resources from community partners to address the healthcare needs of those with no or limited healthcare.
- ▶ Prepare for local disasters such as tropical storms, hurricanes, and wildfires, especially where outdoor learning is being utilized. Local leaders may refer to NLC’s [Emergency Preparedness Amidst COVID-19](#).

3 THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The pandemic has highlighted the disparities in access to technology, broadband, and Wi-Fi services with [15 to 16 million youth nationwide](#) lacking access to the services needed to facilitate distance learning. Amid COVID-19, connectivity is now even more essential to youth and families who need to access telehealth, state and federal funding benefits, employment, and distance learning. While efforts and investments to expand access to technology and internet vary, Learning Hubs can be leveraged to address the digital divide. Local leaders and cross-sector partners can:

- ▶ Utilize additional community facilities to serve as digital access centers where students that lack technology, internet, and safe places to study at home can go to access remote instruction, digital classwork, adult guidance, and enrichment opportunities; with a particular focus on the geographic areas of greatest need.
 - ▶ The City of San Francisco, California is utilizing [40 city facilities](#) including libraries, recreation, and community centers to provide 6,000 of the most disconnected kindergarten- fifth grade youth Wi-Fi, academic, and social interactions.
 - ▶ The City of Orlando’s Department of Families, Parks, and Recreation is coordinating [Neighborhood Center Learning Pods](#) at six local city recreation centers for students to access technology for distance learning.

- ▶ The City of New Orleans Mayors' Office of Youth and Families will launch Community Learning Hubs for children ages 6-18 in partnership with the New Orleans Recreation Development Commission (NORDC) and the New Orleans Public Library (NOPL).
 - ▶ The City of Gaithersburg, Maryland will offer a [Study Bubble club](#) for youth in grades 1 – 8 a safe, conducive, and enriching learning environment for students during their remote learning.
 - ▶ Prior to the pandemic, El Dorado County, California, [public libraries already serve as community hubs](#) for families and are staffed by a team of family engagement, literacy and health specialists.
- ▷ Use staffing capacity of digital access centers to serve as digital literacy coaches and tech support for students and parents.

Additional considerations for long-term investments in broadband:

- ▷ Engage in a holistic, community-wide digital equity planning process to identify needs for broadband infrastructure, affordability, and technical skills, and craft a long-term plan to meet those needs. Federal, state, and nonprofit resources are available to assist in this process, in addition to consultant services.
- ▷ Identify internet “dead zones” in the community and consider existing capabilities or innovative strategies to expand broadband access to these areas.
 - ▶ The City of Covington, Kentucky and partners launched the [Covington Connect Initiative](#) to invest \$2.5 million to create Wi-Fi access points, run new fiber optic cables to neighborhoods, connect large apartment complexes to the internet, and distribute desktops/ laptops to 1,900 families.
 - ▶ Through a partnership with the [1Million Project](#) and other stakeholders, the City of Rochester, New York will continue to distribute Mi-Fi devices at no cost to families in the fall.
 - ▶ In 2013, a large software company set up a location in the City of Little Falls, Minnesota and the city built out its fiber network for businesses. Now, the city and their partners are working together to [bring high-speed internet into the homes of residents](#), where more than 50 percent of students in the school district are eligible for free or reduced lunch.
 - ▶ The City of Chula Vista, California adopted a [Digital Equity and Inclusion Plan](#) that outlines opportunities to engage cross-sector partnerships to apply for grants that would offer new connectivity programs and services to residents.

- ▶ The City of San Antonio, Texas is [leveraging traffic lights](#) to expand fiber networks through the Connected Beyond the Classroom Initiative to provide connectivity to the 1 in 4 households that lack access.

4 ADDRESSING BASIC NEEDS

School closures nationwide revealed the profound inequities in access to academic learning as well as food, mental health and healthcare, housing, and computers/ internet, among the myriad of support services that schools typically provide when physically open. While Community Learning Hubs can serve as digital access centers and safe spaces with adult supervision, they can also identify and connect children, youth, and families to critical services. Things to consider:

- ▷ Leverage the community assessment and outreach efforts conducted by community partners to identify the most underserved youth and families – low-income, homeless, youth in foster-care, those who lack access to technology/ broadband, English language learners, students with disabilities, youth with no to low engagement in distance learning from Spring 2020.
- ▷ Identify and prioritize these individuals and utilize community partners to conduct targeted outreach of families in preparation for the school year.
- ▷ Engage key human and community services that youth and families will need and coordinate a service delivery of these need-based programs to improve access to benefits and maximize efficiency.
- ▷ Utilize the afterschool and out-of-school time professionals that already serve children and youth to conduct routine case management in partnership with trained social worker case managers. This will help assess the continued need of the youth and family and help streamline service delivery within the Community Learning Hub.
 - ▶ The Afterschool Alliance: [A Blueprint for How Afterschool Programs & Community Partners Can Help](#)
- ▷ Continue to strengthen data sharing capabilities among community partners through a strategic use of memorandums of understanding (MOUs) to reduce privacy concerns and build trust.
- ▷ Provide translated resources and target outreach about services offered in the Community Learning Hubs to non-English speaking communities.

- ▶ Ensure that Community Learning Hubs can offer breakfast, lunch, afterschool snack, and potentially afterschool suppers each day like a regular school day and afterschool program through USDA federal nutrition support.
- ▶ Partner with local food banks and USDA sponsored meal programs to offer backpack food programs to support children and families with hunger needs over the weekend. Consider how schools, arts and volunteer groups can add learning and arts packets to the food backpack program.
- ▶ Create mobile programs such as the City of Nashville, Tennessee's [mobile WIC program](#), which partners with faith-based communities, community centers, and libraries to provide services.

5 SUPPORTING THE LEARNING DAY

Regardless of what instruction looks like when school resumes— in-person, online, hybrid – youth will need stronger, more robust learning opportunities, social-emotional support, and stronger adult and peer relationships to thrive. Local leaders and community partners can use Community Learning Hubs to build a new learning day that takes into consideration the priorities, diversity, and culture of the locality. Learning Hubs may:

- ▶ Use outdoor spaces to expand Outdoor Learning opportunities that can improve academic, mental, and physical wellbeing. Particularly consider engaging local environmental agencies and nonprofit to embed outdoor learning curriculum into the school day.
 - ▶ [Big Green: Teaching in Your Garden](#)
 - ▶ [Out Teach: Learning Modules](#)
 - ▶ [Fairmont-Water Works: Understanding the Urban Watershed](#)
 - ▶ [Green Schoolyards America: COVID-19 Outdoor Learning](#)
- ▶ Leverage existing afterschool and summer programs and community partners to support the learning day with expanded learning programming.
- ▶ Young Audiences of Maryland partnered with the City Schools of Baltimore to produce:
 - ▶ [Arts and Learning Kids](#) teaching engaging and important core content for PreK-5 for online and for the Baltimore City Schools' channel by cleverly leveraging artists and musicians and classroom teachers.

- ▶ [Arts and Learning Snacks](#) supplying bite-sized arts learning kits to feed student creativity during the school shutdowns and distributed them at 18 meal sites in Baltimore.
- ▶ Utilize Makerspace for hands-on, experiential learning opportunities.
 - ▶ Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and Beyond School Bells, [Think Make Create](#) labs can be transported for use at community-based learning sites.
- ▶ Incorporate virtual career exploration and workforce preparation curricula for older youth – calling upon 2020 virtual Summer Youth Employment Programs – with the possibility of providing industry-recognized certifications and credentials.
 - ▶ [1.0 Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit](#)
- ▶ Use mobile Recreation Vehicles to bring outdoor learning/ physical activities to underserved neighborhoods
 - ▶ The City of Boise, Idaho has made an investment in [mobile recreation vans to bring state of the art recreation equipment to elementary schools and parks](#).
 - ▶ The City of Louisville, Kentucky is [Engaging Children Outdoors](#), an initiative of Louisville Parks & Recreation, includes a mobile recreation van which visits neighborhoods to provide free naturalist-led activities.

6 STAFFING

Another critical component of designing a Community Learning Hub is considering who will administer and staff the facilities. With growing concerns about academic loss, mental health and wellness, and access to basic needs, more coordinated and integrated staffing will be needed to support youth and families in their return to school and recovery. Community Learning Hubs may:

- ▶ Consider community partners and the role their staff may play within the Learning Hub including staffing facilities, digital literacy coaches/ tech support, coordinating services, and/or serving as support teachers/ tutors in a virtual environment.
- ▶ Assign existing youth practitioners who understand the principals of youth development – afterschool/ summer learning programs, nonprofits, city staff – to facilities and consider mixing representation of staff from organizations based on community needs.

- ▶ Partner with the local school and/or school district to consider incorporating interested school teachers, aides, or paraprofessional into the Community Learning Hubs to build upon the familiarity students may have with them, as well as the alignment of learning, if school staff has the capacity.
- ▶ Mobilize [service programs](#), AmeriCorps, VISTA volunteers, and Senior Corps.
- ▶ Conduct outreach to local community colleges and universities to recruit college students to reduce gaps in staffing support. Many college students are studying at home during the pandemic and may have the time and capacity to serve children and youth in their community. Consider opportunities to leverage teacher preparation programs as opportunities to support educators in the learning day.
- ▶ In addition, local college students typically attending an out-of-area postsecondary institution may be staying local with family and can be another resource to tap into. Utilize the city's communication and outreach resources to broadcast the need for volunteers or interns to serve in the Community Learning Hubs.
- ▶ Offer paid sick leave.

7 FUNDING

The fiscal concerns that cities, towns, and villages have experienced have reverberated throughout the nation. While the cross-sector partnerships developed to create Community Learning Hubs may leverage each partners' funding for the collective action approach, there may be opportunities for additional federal and state funding to support this model which will be critical to address additional needs and challenges. Below are some additional resources to consider:

- ▶ Digital Divide
 - ▶ [A Model for Understanding the Cost to Connect Anchor Institutions with Fiber Optics](#)
 - ▶ [A Strategy to Connect Rural Communities](#)
 - ▶ [Rural American Broadband Connectivity Program](#)
 - ▶ [Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund](#)
 - ▶ [Bridging the Digital Divide for All Americans](#)

- ▶ [Complete 2020 Guide of All Funding Programs, Broadband USA](#)
- ▶ [Broadband Models for Unserved and Underserved Communities](#)
- ▶ Food Access - Providing Meals in Alternative Facilities
 - ▶ [Commodity Supplemental Food Program](#)
 - ▶ [School Breakfast Program](#)
 - ▶ [National School Lunch Program](#)
 - ▶ [Community Eligibility Provision](#)
 - ▶ [Child Nutrition Programs](#)
 - ▶ [Afterschool Nutrition Programs](#)
 - ▶ [Food Research & Action Center: COVID-19 Updates](#)