



RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

DISTRICTS INNOVATING TO ADDRESS EQUITY
ACROSS LOS ANGELES COUNTY



THE GREATER LA
EDUCATION FOUNDATION

INTRODUCTION

Resilience is the only solution to adversity.

Throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic, we have witnessed inspiring examples of resiliency from across the spectrum—from essential workers, to parents, to educators. As a result, we have learned to respond to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, minimize its influence, and forge a path toward recovery. We will be grappling with the devastating effects of the pandemic over the coming years, but when resilient leaders continue to seize the opportunity to think innovatively and equitably, we are destined for a brighter and more just future.

Schools were closed across the country at the onset of the pandemic. Educators and regional systems were forced to adapt to new ways of teaching and operating with little structure or guidance. Despite valiant efforts, conditions have made it difficult for schools and districts to meet student needs—especially for the most disadvantaged.

The pandemic has highlighted and further exacerbated systemic inequities in the education system related to academic achievement, social-emotional learning, and college persistence. A recent report by McKinsey & Company related to student learning from this fall showed that students, on average, were about three months behind where they should be in mathematics. Students of color were three to five months behind in learning. In addition, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be remote and are less likely to have access to learning devices, internet, and live contact with teachers¹. These inequities have also been demonstrated in student grades and attendance.



While navigating uncharted waters, district leaders rose to the challenge and adopted new mindsets to better support our students academically and mentally. It is now our responsibility to hold on to these new approaches as we plan to reopen our schools.”

– Dr. Debra Duardo, Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools

In another troubling example of the impact on low-income families, the Los Angeles Unified School District—second largest in the nation—showed an alarming increase in Ds and Fs and low rates of attendance in the district’s lower-income communities that have been hit especially hard by the pandemic.² There is also evidence by the PACE research collaborative that significant learning loss is occurring for students in the younger grades and the impact is most severe for low-

income students and English Learners.³ The ramifications of such learning loss are unprecedented. The potential of this pandemic to leave a generation of students behind without a coordinated response toward equity is undeniable.

Given the extended physical closures of schools, there has been a heightened need for school districts to implement practices that mitigate potential learning loss and address the social-emotional needs of students. Though no model or practice for distance learning has been identified as the silver bullet for the 1.4 million students in Los Angeles County, many district leaders have responded to the opportunity to implement new strategies and form new partnerships to address student

Los Angeles County by the Numbers

Los Angeles County is home to 80 K–12 school districts that span from South Los Angeles to the Antelope Valley, which serve 1.4 million students, the majority of whom are students of color and come from circumstances of poverty. LA County is also home to critical populations of foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, English Learners, and recent immigrants.

1.4

MILLION STUDENTS

63,117

STUDENTS EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS

70%

SOCIOECONOMICALLY
DISADVANTAGED

46,341

IMMIGRANT
STUDENTS

258,775

ENGLISH LEARNERS

26,110

FOSTER YOUTH

169,718

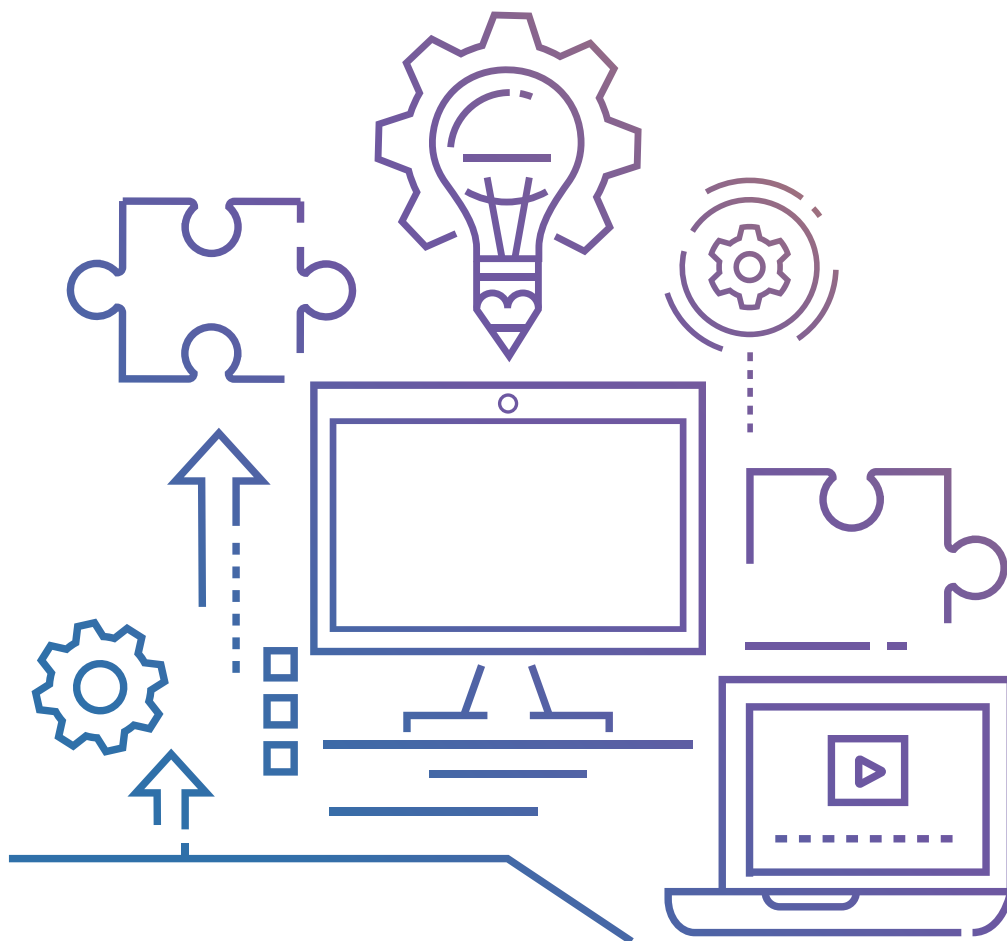
STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES

Source: Los Angeles County Office of Education, [LACOE by the Numbers](#), 2020; CA Dept. of Education, [Title III Immigrant Student Demographics](#), 2019.



learning continuity during the 2020–21 school year. Because of the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 crisis, it is only through trial and error that educators are learning how to best meet their students’ needs and minimize learning loss.

To learn what districts are doing to address learning loss and support the county’s most vulnerable students, in partnership with the Los Angeles County Office of Education, the Greater LA Education Foundation scanned Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans for all of Los Angeles County’s 80 school districts. We identified a collection of innovative and equitable practices being implemented. This report will highlight promising practices across the county in the following categories: supporting the continuity of instruction, mitigating learning loss, social-emotional well-being, and equity and supports for special populations. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a set of approaches meant to spark ideas for district leaders as they continue to evaluate the best way to support the educational experiences and social-emotional needs of their students through distance learning and as they plan to reopen.





LEARNING CONTINUITY AND ATTENDANCE PLANS


Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs) replaced the Local Control and Accountability Plan for the 2020–21 school year, which school districts are traditionally required to update annually to set goals, plan actions, and leverage resources to improve student outcomes. LCPs provide a rich source of information about how districts are responding to the extraordinary challenges of the pandemic and balancing the needs of educators, parents, students, and community members, while also honoring and condensing preexisting plans.

LCPs were adopted by September 30, 2020, by the district’s governing board and then, within five days, filed with the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools. The Superintendent of Schools and the County Office of Education—reviewing authorities—were able to provide recommendations for amendments to the LCP. The Los Angeles County Office of Education has provided guidance, expertise, and support to the region’s 80 K–12 districts during the pandemic and as they completed their LCPs, and has established a Learning Loss and Acceleration Taskforce to support districts as they navigate learning loss and acceleration.

PROMISING PRACTICES

While the LCPs required districts to describe how they would address the impact of COVID-19 on students, staff, and the community in a variety of domains, we concentrated on four categories that will be critical in mitigating the consequences of the pandemic.

Supporting Continuity of Instruction	Mitigating Learning Loss	Social-Emotional Well-Being	Equity (supports for special populations)
How districts will provide continuity of instruction during the school year to ensure students have access to a full curriculum of substantially similar quality regardless of the method of delivery.	How districts will address student learning loss that results from COVID-19. Actions and strategies districts will use to address learning loss and accelerate learning progress for students.	How districts will monitor and support mental health and social and emotional well-being of students and staff during the school year and address trauma and other impacts of COVID-19 on the school community.	How the needs of foster youth, English learners, and low-income students will be considered, and how these actions will be effective in meeting the needs of these students. Additional supports districts will provide during distance learning to assist students with unique needs.



Prior to the pandemic, schools and communities needed additional support to address the challenges of structural inequality and meet the needs of today's diverse learners. This made the impact of the pandemic that much more acute for the county's students. In the face of unprecedented circumstances, district leaders established practices to minimize the long-term effects of distance learning. Districts across LA County experienced similar issues, but their strategies and interventions varied based on their unique assets, resources, and capacity. Below are examples of creative strategies districts have implemented to meet the immediate and ever-changing needs of their students. These strategies are both original interventions, developed to reach students and families under public health protocols, and adaptations of existing programs that have changed to maintain services under these unconventional circumstances.



We've been given an opportunity to assess the future of education and how we could fundamentally reshape and rethink schooling in America so that it is more equitable and responsive to the unique needs of our students."

– Dr. John Garcia, President,
Greater LA Education Foundation





SUPPORTING CONTINUITY OF INSTRUCTION

Technical support for students and families—“Tech Tuesdays”

Overwhelmingly, districts, teachers, and parents have been faced with the rapid understanding and facilitating of distance learning. This has been challenged by limitations around access to tools and technology for high-need students, particularly homeless families, foster youth, and youth connected to the criminal justice system. In the early months, teachers and parents were also desperately in need of professional training for online instruction and instructional supports.

In response to parent requests, one district implemented “Tech Tuesdays,” which are weekly, virtual technology training sessions designed specifically for parents. The sessions are paired with resources and a parent discussion forum that allows parents to submit questions and comments during the virtual event. Session topics include learning platforms (i.e., Schoology), monitoring students’ learning, staying connected with schools and the district, navigating the internet safely, creating successful home study environments, healthy bodies and healthy minds, and video conferencing.

During each “Tech Tuesday” session, presenters provide an overview of each session topic and share their screen to provide parents with step-by-step instructions. The trainings are led by an Instructional Technology Coordinator and an Instructional Technology Curriculum Specialist who provide English and Spanish assistance. Occasionally, guest speakers are invited to present a more in-depth overview on

specific topics. The sessions remain available online on the district website and are open to any interested parent.

DISTRICT #1 QUICK FACTS GRADES K–12

Enrollment	14,336
African American	7.7%
Hispanic or Latino	88.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.4%
White	1.0%
English Learner	25.8%
Free/reduced lunch	94.7%
Source: CDE Data Quest 2019–20	



Now that we’re planning for next year, we’re looking at equity and access—consistency among our classrooms. We had families that had really great experiences and we had families that had really negative experiences.

- Instructional Technology Coordinator

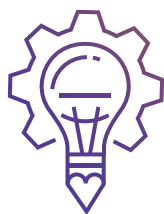


MITIGATING LEARNING LOSS

Summer STEAM Camp for low-income students

Given the extended physical closures of schools and youth-serving community centers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increased need for responsive summertime learning environments to mitigate potential learning loss and to address the social-emotional needs of youth, especially for the most vulnerable student groups.

Understanding that most families in the community do not have the financial means to provide their children with tutoring services during the summer, nor access to supplementary materials or programs to use at home, one district launched the Summer STEAM Camp for students in grades 3–12.



The Summer STEAM Camp engaged students in STEAM disciplines via a virtual project-based curriculum to mitigate learning loss and support students in building confidence, creativity, and resilience.

Students in grades 3–8 used interactive programs like Minecraft and Scratch to solve complicated, real-world problems. Students programmed games and built models based on community issues. High school students participated in the Change the World through Code program, received certification in Artificial Intelligence through

IBM, and learned the business and creative sides of the music and gaming industry through programs like Musicversity and Esports Academy. High school students also participated in the district's GEAR UP Summer Bridge program for additional academic support in areas such as developing study skills, college and career readiness, and social-emotional support.

The district will continue to implement the Summer STEAM Camp for low-income students, foster youth, and English Learners during the summer of the 2020–21 school year.

DISTRICT #2 QUICK FACTS GRADES PK–12

Enrollment	23,194
African American	19.3%
Hispanic or Latino	77.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.6%
White	0.5%
English Learner	26.3%
Free/reduced lunch	93.4%
Source: CDE Data Quest 2019–20	

Two-week academic boot camp for K–8 students to mitigate learning loss

Another district sought ways to mitigate student learning loss going into the school year. During the summer, the district offered a free two-week academic boot camp in English Language Arts and Math, which focused on reviewing grade-level standards and mitigating any learning loss that may have taken place during school closures in the spring of the 2019–20 academic year. The district targeted students with low report card grades; however, the boot camp was open for all students in grades K–8 who were interested, including English Learners, special education students, and others.



Students took part virtually either in the morning or afternoon or both, depending on the intensity of the support needed. Morning and afternoon sessions lasted between two and three hours; thus, a student could receive up to six hours of daily support over the two-week boot camp. The virtual boot camp was led by certified teachers, compensated with the district’s learning loss mitigation funds, who served over 1,200 students.

The free two-week boot camp was well received by district families; however, parents expressed their preference to keep students offline if the program continues in the summer preceding the 2021–22 academic year. Accordingly, the district is exploring ways to offer the boot camp in an in-person format in subsequent years.


DISTRICT #3 QUICK FACTS GRADES PK–12

Enrollment	11,009
African American	2.2%
Hispanic or Latino	13.8%
Asian/Pacific Islander	27.8%
White	43.7%
English Learner	6.3%
Free/reduced lunch	7.9%

Source: CDE Data Quest 2019–20

“Moving forward, we will continue to look at opportunities to support students in need and mitigate any learning loss. We are trying to envision in-person opportunities for students who need support.”

— Deputy Superintendent

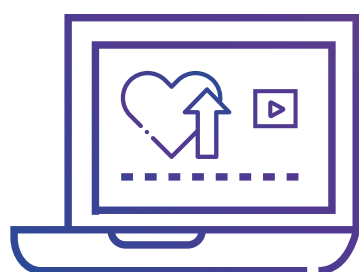


YOU ARE
NOT
ALONE

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Social-Emotional Wellness webpage

School closures and social distancing measures have complicated how schools are able to address the social-emotional needs of the community they serve. Many students, families, and educators are weathering this crisis in isolation. To offer support and alleviate the prolonged stress of the pandemic, distance learning, and the racial injustice crisis, one district's psychological services team curated a new social-emotional wellness webpage with school- and community-based resources for students, parents, and educators.



For students, resources are organized by grade, PK–8, and range from informational material about the COVID-19 pandemic, to mindfulness and breathing exercises, tips and guides for recognizing emotions, and mind-stimulating online games. Much of the student content is paired with videos and graphics.

Resources for parents, caregivers, and educators are organized by self-care exercises, strategies to improve social-emotional learning at home, resources to support children through the pandemic, and community resources. Each informational page is accompanied by links and contact information to additional

resources. The webpage supplements a three-tiered model implemented by the district to support the social-emotional well-being of students, parents, and staff.

DISTRICT #4 QUICK FACTS GRADES PK–8

Enrollment	2,394
African American	0.3%
Hispanic or Latino	37.8%
Asian/Pacific Islander	53.6%
White	1.7%
English Learner	39.8%
Free/reduced lunch	80.8%
Source: CDE Data Quest 2019–20	



Dedicated site staff to support social-emotional needs of students and personnel



The pandemic has impacted all aspects of students' lives and continues to compound trauma. To support their students through the COVID-19 crisis, another district provides additional social-emotional support and strategies to effectively respond to the stressors they are faced with. Each school site has at least one staff member dedicated to monitoring the well-being of students and staff and providing them with social-emotional learning support. The district provides access to mental health services for all students through a Community Resource Collaborative that includes seven community agencies, four

district mental health personnel, and 18 graduate interns.

Additionally, the district incorporated a social-emotional element to its 15-day virtual Summer Academy. During the Summer Academy, courses were offered to prepare students in grades PK–12 with the skills needed to implement a wide range of social-emotional and character-based strategies. During the academy, migrant

education students were provided a Pupil Personnel Services Counseling Intern from a local university. The district received positive feedback from both students and teachers, and so the decision was made to continue the program into the 2020–21 school year.

DISTRICT #5 QUICK FACTS GRADES PK–12

Enrollment	16,930
African American	2.6%
Hispanic or Latino	79.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.5%
White	7.6%
English Learner	16%
Free/reduced lunch	74.4%

Source: CDE Data Quest 2019–20

Furthermore, the district has committed to a three-year professional development program for school staff to gain knowledge and skills to provide social-emotional learning to students in a culturally responsive manner. In collaboration with the same local university, ongoing professional development for the district's Counseling Supervisors will continue virtually throughout the year.



EQUITY (SUPPORTS FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS)

Pairing high school mentors with elementary English Learner students

When schools closed, educators across the country reported that distance learning made it difficult to reach English Learners (ELs), immigrant students, and low-income students. The Migration Policy Institute reports that, despite enormous efforts by educators to provide continuity of instruction, their efforts fell short for ELs for many reasons, including a lack of access to digital devices and broadband, parents' limited capacity to support learning at home, inadequate distance learning resources and training for teachers, and school-family language barriers.⁴

To support their special populations of refugee students and ELs, one district partnered with a local refugee settlement organization to offer a tutoring program that pairs high school, native English speakers with elementary ELs in a mentoring and support model. The partnership stemmed from an idea a high school student had for an Eagle Scout project. The student approached the organization with the idea to start a program in which he and other students would tutor refugee students from an elementary school.

Led by the local refugee settlement organization, the program provides each high school tutor with a short training before they are paired with an elementary student. The students being tutored are all new arrivals to the country, having arrived from the Middle East through a variety of circumstances. All students are refugees whose native language is not English, but who are dedicated to success in school. The student volunteers contact the families and the teachers of the elementary student, check in multiple times a week

via Zoom and FaceTime, help with homework, read stories, and build friendships. The program has been sustained throughout the pandemic and has been praised by parents and teachers.

DISTRICT #6 QUICK FACTS GRADES K-12

Enrollment	6,868
African American	4.4%
Hispanic or Latino	43.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	10.9%
White	32.3%
English Learner	4.8%
Free/reduced lunch	33.5%
Source: CDE Data Quest 2019-20	



For many students, whose parents are learning English themselves, the assistance of a high school friend to guide them through navigating distance learning and building friendships is invaluable. Their dedication to creating these friendships displays the resilience of these students to succeed by any means necessary.”

— Director of Intervention and English Learner Programs

ADDITIONAL COMMON THEMES

Although districts implemented different strategies to support distance learning, we found many common approaches to widespread issues that were too numerous to mention in this report, including professional development for teachers, the use of various learning platforms, and unique partnerships with nonprofit organizations.



Professional Development

Pivoting to distance learning came with a steep learning curve for educators. To support teachers and equip them with the necessary tools needed to effectively teach students, many districts provided professional development opportunities in technology and digital platforms, supporting special populations in a remote environment, mental health and student well-being, and social-emotional learning. One district provided professional development that specifically addressed how to adapt online learning content based on students' individual needs, and another provided training on how to create online learning activities utilizing already adopted curriculum materials and programs. Many districts expanded the professional development opportunities to other school site staff and parents, particularly those opportunities that focused on student and staff wellness. Some districts took a step further and created a repository of trainings for teachers and staff to refer to and review at their own pace.



Use of Learning Platforms

When schools closed, the issue was not the lack of digital learning platforms. In fact, there was an abundance of them. The difficult task was identifying which platform would meet the needs of the students and teachers best. Some districts streamlined their approach to use fewer learning platforms across the district to make it easier for parents to navigate and engage, while others offered several different platforms so that teachers had a set of different tools to engage students in the different curricula. Other districts chose a particular platform because it included components of school accountability, including attendance, completion of schoolwork, and assessments. Lastly, one district made plans for the continued use of digital platforms when in-person classes resume so that foster youth and low-income and English Learner students can participate in additional synchronous and asynchronous intervention programs.



Partnerships

While the effects of the pandemic have been devastating, it has fostered new partnerships between school districts and nonprofit and community-based organizations. Many districts spent time to build relationships with external organizations to increase and improve services for students and their families as their needs continued to grow. Some partnerships were formed to provide basic needs to families, such as transportation. Other partnerships provided mental health and wellness services like individual and group counseling, assertive case management, and substance use prevention and intervention. One district partnered with community organizations to provide parent and staff workshops on suicide prevention, social-emotional learning practices, and mindfulness tools. Other districts partnered with institutions of higher education to provide students with tutoring, bridge programming, and social-emotional support.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended all aspects of our lives, and public institutions and systems face a long road to recovery. Although the consequences of the pandemic have been devastating, it has necessitated that we evaluate operations, practices, and approaches on behalf of students and families. The pandemic has not let us shy away from the truth—our systems of education are inequitable and do not always support innovation. What matters now is how we come out of the pandemic, which will be determined by the way in which leaders continue to be resilient and take advantage of the window of opportunity to learn from our past, take risks, and make necessary changes.

The practices highlighted in this report are a small collection of innovative strategies being implemented by districts across Los Angeles County to support students, families, and teachers. Strategies vary based on the demographics of the district, district culture, and resources available. Districts should tailor their approaches based on expertise, capacity, and assets, driving progress and catalyzing our regional recovery.

Recently approved federal and state funding streams will allow districts to make choices related to accelerating learning and the social-emotional well-being of students. District leaders must keep equity at the forefront of those decisions, embrace forward thinking, and be bold enough to use this opportunity to create new and equitable learning systems for students. As districts plan for the reopening of schools, it is imperative that they take advantage of lessons learned during the pandemic while pivoting to distance learning. These lessons can help identify ways to simultaneously mitigate learning loss and accelerate learning and growth for all students. There is not one correct way to educate and support students, but districts now have a clearer picture of the types of systems and practices that can be employed and may be more at liberty to adopt them.

We foresee many changes to the way traditional education is administered, and we also see the role of schools continuing to evolve into much more than just an institution for learning, a system that supports the well-being of the whole student and the family. While the digital aspect of distance learning may have had the steepest learning curve, we anticipate that there will be a strong digital component in the future of education to meet the needs of our diverse learners.



The most recent example of resiliency has been watching our elementary schools reopen for in-person learning. Principals have planned and executed routines to a tee, teachers have adapted to the protocols, shifted their instruction back to in-person, meeting kids where they are at.

– Deputy Superintendent



Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Kristina Romero, with support provided by Steve Purcell, Abigail Gomez, Sam Gelinas, and John Garcia.

We are grateful to Great Public Schools Now and United Way of Greater Los Angeles for their generous support. We also offer our sincere thanks to the Los Angeles County of Education and its Division of Accountability, Support & Monitoring, as well as the district leaders who offered feedback and shared their experiences with us.

ENDNOTES

1. Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, “COVID-19 and Learning Loss—Disparities Grow and Students Need Help,” McKinsey & Company, December 8, 2020, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help#>.
2. Howard Blume and Julia Barajas, “Ds and Fs Surge, Attendance Slips among L.A.’s Poorest Students amid Distance Learning,” Los Angeles Times, November 2, 2020, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-11-02/failing-grades-surge-poor-la-students-covid-19>.
3. Libby Pier, Heather J. Hough, Michael Christian, Noah Bookman, Britt Wilkenfeld, and Rick Miller, “COVID-19 and the Educational Equity Crisis,” PACE, January 25, 2021, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/covid-19-and-educational-equity-crisis>.
4. Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarin, Educating English Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Policy Ideas for States and School Districts (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-english-learners-covid-19-final.pdf>.

THE GREATER LA
EDUCATION FOUNDATION
2021



THE GREATER LA
EDUCATION FOUNDATION