

Responding to Covid-19:

The Impact of City Connects During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Spring 2022



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City Connects and the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted education in myriad ways. Starting in spring of 2020, when schools closed their doors, and continuing through the 2020-21 school year and beyond, regular routines for children and families have been disrupted and changed. These conditions exacerbated existing challenges, such as food insecurity, child care, medical care, and other needs. During times of remote learning, students' homes became classrooms, but without the supports and structures of the school itself and the surrounding community. For those living in poverty, the impact of the pandemic has been especially dramatic; these communities have experienced the compounding effects of both the pandemic and ongoing racial and economic injustice.

Throughout the time of the pandemic, the value of a systemic approach to supporting the strengths and needs of students and families has been made clear. At the initial shutdown, students in schools implementing City Connects – an evidence-based approach to integrated student support – already had customized student support plans in place, documented and accessible in a secure online platform. These plans included details on individual students' strengths and areas of need, as well as information on the supports and enrichments the student was receiving from the school and community agencies. Having plans in place helped City Connects Coordinators, from a distance, to coordinate virtual supports and identify new supports. Student plans were updated throughout the pandemic as Coordinators worked with teachers, families, and students. Starting in fall 2020, as schools gradually re-opened, Coordinators played a central role in monitoring responses to individual student and family needs, and helping schools open strongly in an unprecedented context.

City Connects continued documenting conditions and analyzing what was happening on the ground throughout this time. Researchers closely examined the various ways in which the City Connects practice systematically identified and addressed both academic and non-academic needs of students and their families in City Connects schools during the school closures of spring 2020. Researchers gathered information from City Connects Coordinators on student and family needs that had arisen during the first months of the pandemic in the spring as well as challenges that students, families, teachers, and other school staff encountered in fall 2020. Finally, in the spring of 2021, in anonymous satisfaction surveys for principals, teachers, and community partners who had worked with City Connects schools during the 2020-21 school year, questions related to the Covid-19 pandemic were included. Findings are presented on the pages that follow.

The pandemic brought to light the value of systemic approaches to student support. The need to support children and families systemically will not fade as the pandemic recedes. As the Covid-19 crisis illuminated, having a comprehensive, customized, coordinated, and continuous approach in place can not only help schools and communities navigate their day-to-day operations, but also provide them with a framework during times of crisis.

City Connects during the first months of the pandemic

When schools closed their doors in the spring of 2020, there was no playbook to follow. In schools implementing City Connects, however, there was an intervention already in place to respond to the needs of children and families. Between March and June of 2020, City Connects Coordinators were able to systematically identify many academic and non-academic needs that surfaced for students, families, and school staff during this time. Further, the City Connects intervention was able to leverage its existing practice, service delivery, and community partnerships to meet Covid-19-related needs (Pollack, Theodorakakis, & Walsh, 2021).

Researchers uncovered information on the identification of these needs, and on the way the practice was leveraged to respond, through an analysis of several data sets. These included:

1. Coordinators' weekly open-ended survey responses, collected over 13 weeks, from March through June 2020. These surveys asked about Coordinators' work with students and families; their work with teachers, school leaders, and school staff; and needs they had seen repeatedly.¹
2. Records of services delivered to students, organized by categories, and maintained in the proprietary MyConnects database for every student in the school.
3. Estimates by Program Managers, who supervise Coordinators, of the percentage of students/families experiencing each of three prevalent pandemic-related challenges: unreachable students/families, food insecurity, and lack of access to technology.

Needs

Analyses showed widespread, persistent needs, many of which predated the Covid-19 pandemic. Responses from Coordinators suggested that school closures exacerbated some needs, such as food insecurity, while also creating new needs, such as Chromebook distribution. At the **whole school level**, needs fell into two categories:

- Schools needed to develop **processes** for organizing support and prioritizing tasks, disseminating information to families, and communicating with each other and with students and their families. Remote learning also involved process needs such as tracking attendance, grading, Chromebook use, and managing assignments.
- **Communication** needs were also school-wide, as schools and districts were tasked with communicating remote learning plans and expectations, sharing information on accessing resources, and communicating other necessary information.

At the **individual level**, needs spanned academic and non-academic domains. Information from MyConnects showed that 86,352 services were delivered across 94 schools between March 15 and August 15, 2020, with most services delivered before the summer. The category with the largest number of delivered services was Family Assistance and Support. Open-ended survey responses from Coordinators provided further information on the individual-level needs experienced by students, families, and school staff.

- Following the abrupt school closures, **essential resource needs** arose immediately. Technology and internet access were frequent needs for students and families. By the middle of May, technology needs were met for most students in most schools. Other supports for daily living were also present, such as food, clothing, medication, and diapers. Financial support was also an area of need for families, including help paying bills, rental assistance, and resources related to housing insecurity.

¹ 89 City Connects Coordinators from 94 schools were invited to submit weekly surveys throughout the spring; 81 participated. In total, 580 responses were submitted.

- **Academic needs** also emerged at the individual student level. Students and families needed help establishing and maintaining their at-home learning routines, including assistance accessing and navigating online learning platforms and tools, such as Google Classroom or ClassDoJo. Teachers also experienced challenges, and maintaining student engagement was an area of need.
- **Socio-emotional needs** were prevalent for students, families, and school staff. Initially, feelings of being “overwhelmed” were common following the initial school closure and transition to online learning. Children, families, and school staff needed support for feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. As time passed, this need evolved as students needed support for feelings of isolation. Caregivers and school staff were experiencing burnout.

Response

In response to school-wide and individual needs, City Connects was able to facilitate effective and efficient support.

- The City Connects model itself proved highly adaptable to the new context of the pandemic. City Connects Coordinators were able to **maintain and leverage City Connects-specific practices** throughout the spring of 2020 to continue supporting students. Coordinators and teachers worked together to conduct Whole Class Reviews and the re-tiering process for their students. In spring 2020, this process included the impact of Covid-19 on students’ ability to learn and thrive. Coordinators and school staff also conducted Individual Student Reviews for students with more intensive needs. Using MyConnects, Coordinators could continue their work of facilitating service delivery and following up. Coordinators were also able to adapt their established practices to better support Covid-19 response (e.g., by attending virtual professional development offerings).
- Coordinators worked with their colleagues to continue **facilitating referrals and connections to resources**. Given the context of Covid, this involved expanding their collaborative practices to better identify and meet the needs of students and families in the school. Together, they created, implemented, and adapted processes. For example, a “food response team” was formed in one school to respond to the urgent need in this area. Coordinators also leveraged and expanded existing relationships. For example, building on prior relationships with families, Coordinators conducted “well-being phone calls” and reached out in cases of new need, such as a hospitalization.
- Coordinators used their training, as well as their unique positions within their school communities, to **expand direct intervention with families, students, and school staff**.

Families. From March 15, 2020 through August 15, 2020, over 25,000 services for family assistance and support were delivered. For example, Coordinators helped families complete housing vouchers; apply for gift cards, emergency rent assistance, unemployment and SNAP benefits; and obtain utility assistance and internet access. Coordinators responded to emergencies and hand-delivered resources like clothes, food, and Chromebooks. Coordinators also provided emotional support to families, as well as academic support to facilitate online learning.

Students. Coordinators offered socio-emotional and academic support to students through virtual meetings; discussions of time management, stress, and anger management; pep talks; and other forms of emergency support. Coordinators checked in with students to provide academic support; discuss learning engagement, attendance, motivation, and grades. Coordinators also provided technology and homework help to support students academically.

School staff. Coordinators held phone and video meetings with colleagues to plan, share updates, and discuss needs. With principals, Coordinators discussed student support, teacher wellbeing, systems and process for resource distribution, summer programming, and reopening plans. With teachers, Coordinators supported family outreach, assisted with various aspects of remote instruction, and supported teachers’ own mental health and emotional needs.

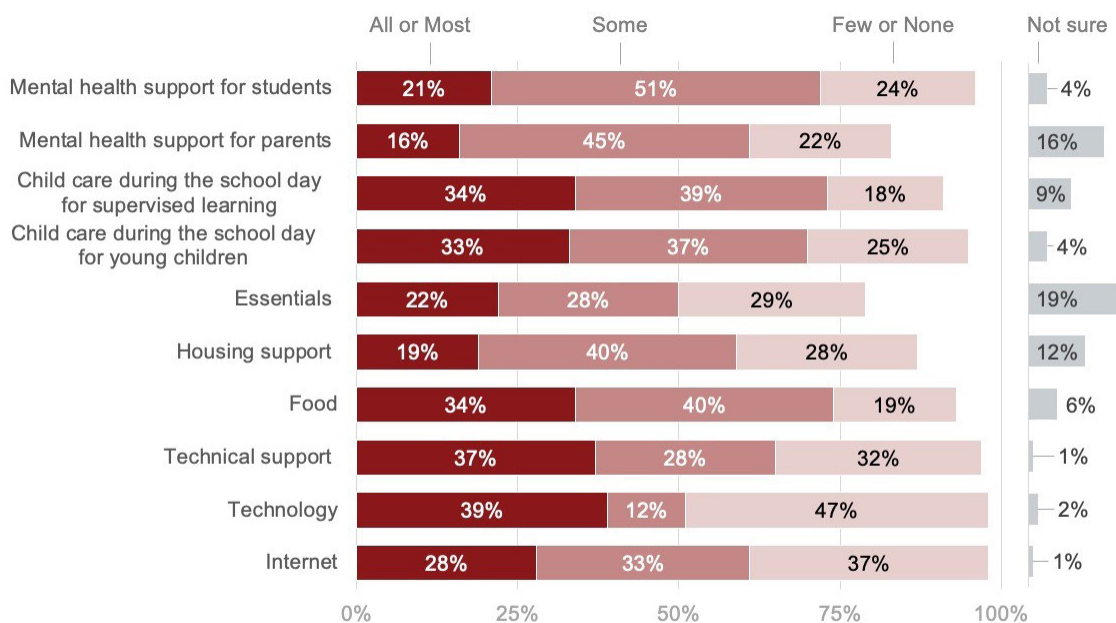
In sum, these analyses revealed the myriad ways that the City Connects practice – already present in schools – enabled an effective response during the opening months Covid-19 pandemic.

City Connects in the pandemic context of fall 2020

Building on their work during the first months of the pandemic, City Connects Coordinators implemented the practice strongly during the 2020-21 school year, as Covid continued to disrupt education. In November of 2020, Coordinators were invited to participate in an anonymous survey about their ongoing work during the pandemic.¹ Their responses helped to characterize the unique context of school-reopening as the pandemic continued, including the nature and severity of different needs and the related stressors on school staff.

In fall 2020, social-emotional, family, academic, and basic needs presented challenges. As shown in Figure 1, the greatest needs, according to Coordinator estimates, were for technology (e.g., Chromebooks), technical support with online learning platforms, food, and child care for learning or supervision.

FIGURE 1. Coordinator estimates of how many students and families needed various resources in fall 2020



Essential needs: medication, baby, or hygiene supplies.

Housing support: rent relief, vouchers.

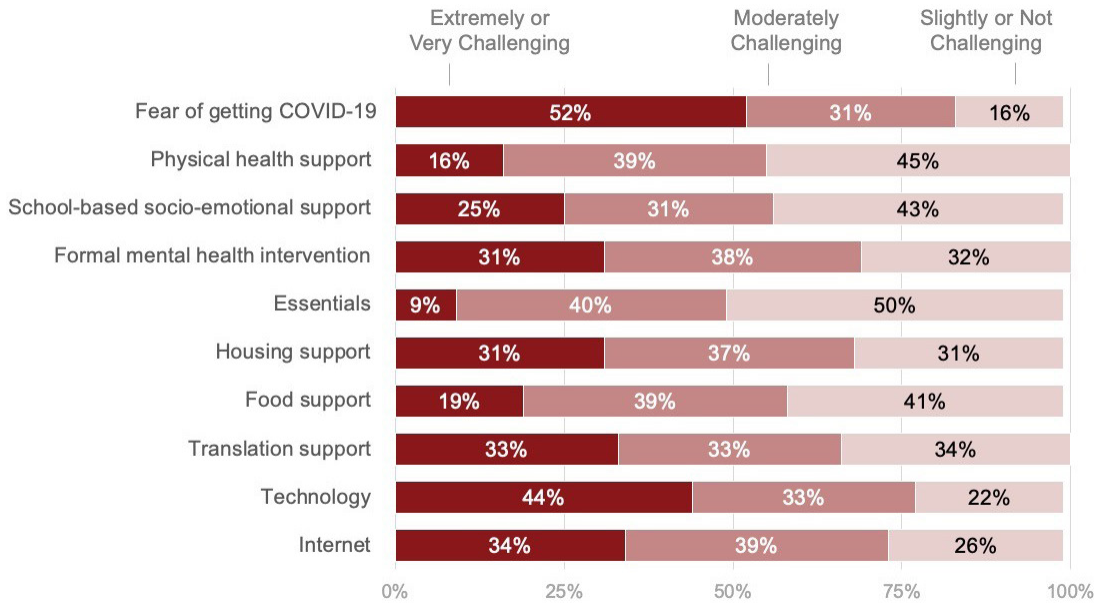
Technical support: online learning platforms.

Technology: Chromebooks.

Coordinators also estimated how challenging various needs or concerns in the areas of health, socio-emotional support, and access to resources might be for students and families. See Figure 2 at right.

¹ The anonymous survey was sent to 90 City Connects Coordinators; 73 of the 90 participated.

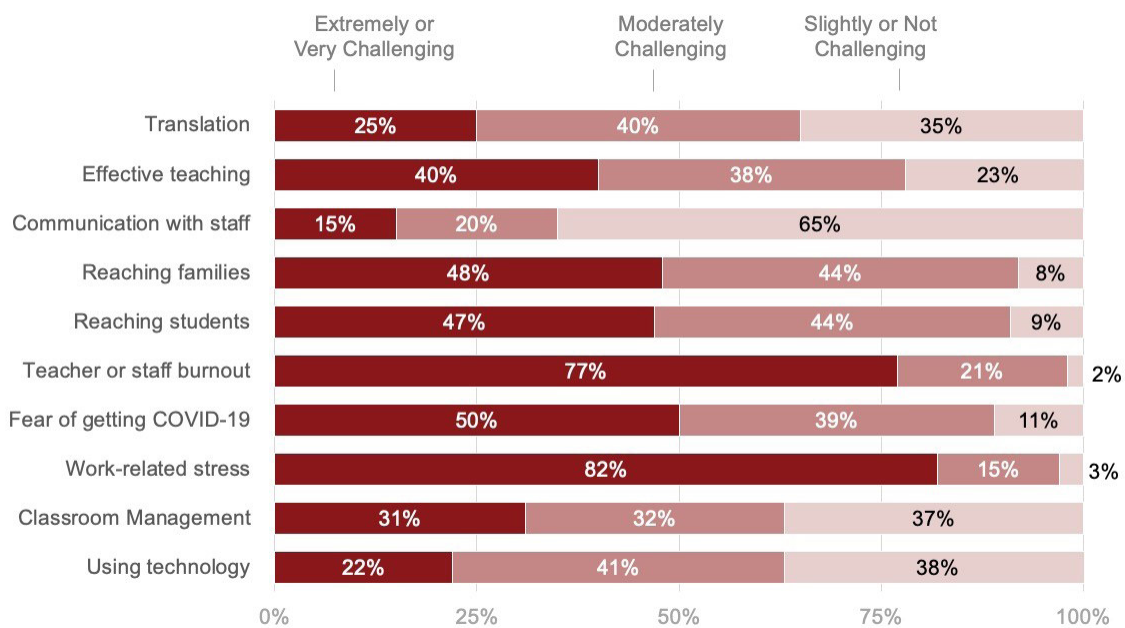
FIGURE 2. Coordinator estimates of how challenging pandemic-related concerns were for students and families



Notably, more than half of responding Coordinators (52%) estimated that a fear of getting Covid-19 was extremely or very challenging for students and families. Other significant challenges, as estimated by 30% or more of Coordinators as extremely or very challenging, include mental health interventions, housing support, translation support, technology, and internet access.

Coordinators also responded to questions related to stressors for teachers and school staff. More than three quarters (77%) of Coordinators estimated that teacher and staff burnout was extremely or very challenging. Moreover, half of Coordinators reported that fear of getting Covid-19 was extremely or very challenging for teachers/staff. Communication concerns were also prevalent; nearly half of Coordinators reported that reaching families and reaching students were significant challenges for teachers and school staff.

FIGURE 3. Coordinator estimates of how challenging each item was for teachers and school staff



As illustrated in the three figures above, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were substantial for students, families, and educators. These needs and challenges highlight the value of a tailored approach to student support.

City Connects in the ongoing pandemic during 2020-21: Principal, teacher, and community partner views

In the spring of 2021, more than a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, City Connects conducted anonymous surveys of principals, teachers, and community partners. These surveys are conducted regularly to gather feedback and insight from stakeholders on their satisfaction with City Connects and to identify areas for improvement. The survey also asked each group about the impact of City Connects on their work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Principals, teachers, and community partners were all asked if the City Connects practice helped them in their work during the Covid-19 crisis. In each group, the majority of participants responded “yes.”

Overall, 91% of principals reported that the City Connects practice helped them in their work during the Covid-19 crisis.¹ When asked to identify specific ways in which the City Connects practice enabled them to be effective during the crisis, principals most frequently cited support to families or connecting families to services; outreach, connection, and communication with families; and supporting students or the student support process.

In the words of a principal from Minnesota,

“Our Coordinator was an invaluable resource to our students and families throughout this time. She coordinated multiple different services to address basic needs including several one-time food distributions until a partnership for ongoing, weekly food distribution could be secured. She helped connect students and families to breakfast and lunch programs within their local school district during Spring 2020 distance programming. Moreover, she maintained a schedule of regular check ins with at-risk students during virtual learning and the summer months until in-person services could resume during Fall 2021.”

In the words of an Ohio principal,

“We were able to connect families with established community partners for services with very little work involved. With the trust we built with families, they reached out to us with concerns and requests. The [City Connects] Coordinator was able to manage non-academic needs while I focused on the academic needs of students. We made a great team.”

For teachers, more than two-thirds – 68% overall – reported that City Connects had helped them in their work during the Covid-19 pandemic.² Teachers most frequently cited Coordinator outreach, connection, and communication with families; and providing resources or services to students and their families as examples of specific ways in which the City Connects practice enabled them to be effective during the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹ Data source: City Connects 2021 principal survey

² Data source: City Connects 2021 teacher survey

In the words of a Minnesota teacher,

“City Connects helped families to eat and pay rent during the worst of the Covid crisis, by connecting them with services. It is literally a life-saving program. City Connects also helped students to get computers so that they could stay connected to school and peers.”

A teacher in Boston commented,

“The City Connects Coordinator at my school acted as a constant resource for both my students and my families, with any needs that arose. Particularly the Coordinator was helpful in developing very creative and flexible interventions for students in need.”

Community partners also responded to City Connects’ impact on their work during the pandemic. Overall, 71% of partners felt that the City Connects practice helped them in their work during the crisis.¹ When asked to specify ways in which the practice had enabled their effectiveness during this time, community partners most often referred to City Connects helping connect students and families to services, maintaining a consistent line of knowledge or communication, and City Connects’ support of in-person or virtual services. In the words of a Minnesota community partner,

“When our providers struggled to connect with students, [City Connects Coordinators] were able to contact families at home when distance learning as they already had relationships with the students/families.”



¹ Data source: City Connects 2021 community partner survey

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact the lives of students, families, and school staff. Throughout this time, City Connects Coordinators have used the City Connects practice to identify needs in their schools and to leverage elements of the City Connects practice to help serve children and families. Needs have been widespread, and teachers and school staff have experienced stress and burnout. Some challenges, however, may have been mitigated by the preexisting relationships and individualized student support plans cultivated as part of the City Connects practice. Moreover, most principals, teachers, and community partners agreed that the City Connects practice helped them in their work during the Covid-19 crisis. Taken together, these findings suggest that a systemic approach to student support, as exemplified by City Connects, has benefitted students, families, and school staff during the pandemic. Even as the pandemic recedes, there is no reason to believe that the need for systemic student support will less necessary in our nation's schools.

References

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