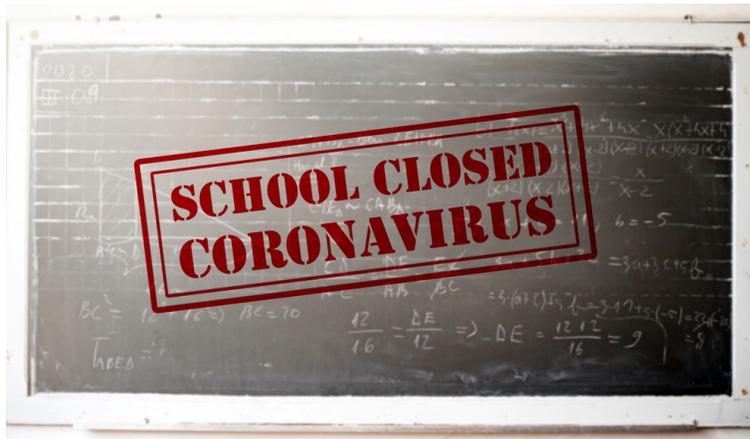




WHEN A SCHOOL IS MORE THAN JUST A SCHOOL: HOW SCHOOLS OF OPPORTUNITY ARE HANDLING CORONAVIRUS CLOSURES



Across the U.S., schools have been finding innovative ways to serve their students, even after their doors were closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most obviously, teachers have been providing lessons and instruction through various forms of distance education. Districts are also offering free “grab-and-go” meals and even emergency child care centers built around the idea of social distancing. Groups like the [Learning Policy Institute](#), the [Network for Public Education](#), and [Local Progress](#) are documenting these and other ways that governmental entities like school districts are responding to need.

Because NEPC has been recognizing extraordinary [Schools of Opportunity](#) for the past five years, we’re starting to investigate how those schools have been responding to the crisis. The recognition program honors high schools that engage in research-based practices that focus on closing opportunity gaps.

Not surprisingly, the recognized schools are indeed working to provide free meals. 2015 honoree Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, located in the Bronx, is typical of this trend. The New York school is offering students grab-and-go breakfasts and lunches that they can pick up on campus. The school’s coronavirus webpage also lists names and addresses for nearby food pantries, as well as resources where families can get free diapers.

At Rochester International Academy, which NEPC recognized as a School of Opportunity in 2016, principal Mary Andrecolich-Diaz [canceled all afternoon classes](#) when the shutdown seemed imminent, in order to allow the school’s interpreters to work with teachers and their many non-English-speaking refugee students. The school has been using Google Classroom

and Chromebooks to continue instruction, using district-provided home Wi-Fi.

For Andrecolich-Diaz, the first goal was simply to guarantee the students could access schoolwork. But she also wanted to make sure that the school's students could pass along health information to their families regarding the Coronavirus crisis. Many of those families are refugees who may be illiterate even in their own languages, adding to their vulnerable status. In the case of refugees from countries such as Burma, Nepal, and Somalia, some families were also unable to understand broadcast news media accounts that, if not in English, are typically only offered in one other language: Spanish.

Like the Rochester school, most Schools of Opportunity serve large numbers of students living in poverty – students for whom school is not just a learning experience, but a lifeline. Accordingly, these schools typically provide services like food pantries and health care that extend well beyond the classroom, a practice that is critical to closing opportunity gaps. They also serve large numbers of English learners and students with disabilities, as well as students who are, or whose family members are, without documentation. So the closures have the potential to hit their students especially hard.

Yet, like so many of their peers around the country, Schools of Opportunity educators have found ways to continue to help their students access needed assistance. As another example, Leland & Gray Union Middle & High School, also a 2016 honoree, is making mental health counselors available via email, Google Hangouts, and telephone.

“While we won't be in our offices for you to drop by whenever you need, we are available,” they wrote in a heartfelt message on the [Townshend, Vermont school's website](#):

Just as when we are in school, you can come to us with anything: If you are struggling with academics (either the content or the format of learning), please let us know. If you are having a tough day and want to talk about it or take a break from the stress, let us know. If you are having a tough time with family or friends, let us know. If you are lonely, let us know (we probably are too!). If you just want to say hi, please do!

At 2018-2019 honoree Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine, teachers are trying to maintain a sense of togetherness and community by moving daily “crew” meetings online. The purpose of these small groups – who remain together throughout a student's four years at the school – is to develop a sense of community by connecting faculty members with students and students with one another, helping students plan for the future, and engaging in civil dialogue about important current events.

In addition to translating documents into their students' home languages, Schools of Opportunity also “translate” curricula and other material into culturally relevant messages. This is evident in the schools' messaging in this very stressful and uncertain time. For instance, on a [letter on the school website](#), the leadership team of the Native American Community Academy in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which was honored in 2018-19, draws upon values shared by its many Native American students: “Remember that we come from a legacy of resiliency and strength both from our land and ancestors. During these three weeks, we ask that we come together as a community to support each other.”

We encourage each of you to repeat our exercise. Visit the websites for your local schools and school districts, and read about the remarkable steps they're taking to serve their students and communities. These are bright lights in dark times, and we can all use the inspiration.

NEPC Resources on Schools of Opportunity

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