

Doing Something Together: Lessons from Green Dot Public Schools’ COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

Green Dot Public Schools California

A big-city charter network helps students and teachers in Los Angeles navigate the crisis by creating consistency and coherence across schools.

Key lessons:

- Decisive leadership, clear direction, and organizational coherence are critical in a time of crisis and uncertainty.
- Taking regular feedback from students and teachers, and increasing networkwide collaboration, helped marshal an effective crisis response.
- In the words of the chief academic officer, the crisis “basically has taught us that we can move a lot more quickly on things than we ever thought we could. . . . Let’s not forget that when we’re not in crisis mode because we can probably do things a lot more quickly than we thought.”

Number of schools: 653

Number of schools: 19

Number of students: ~11,200

Grades served: 6–12

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.

Like schools across the country, Green Dot Public Schools California closed its campuses in mid-March and kept them closed for the rest of the school year. Early in the crisis, the network focused on distributing food, Chromebooks, and hotspots to its roughly 11,000 students. It conducted wellness checks by phone with all of its families. Over the next six weeks, Green Dot officials said they distributed over 500,000 meals, 8,000 computers, and 1,300 hotspots.

By mid-April, Green Dot launched a remote learning program to provide students access to instruction. The program, according to Green Dot's CEO, was designed to stand up virtual schools "where the adults had a common understanding of what kids need, how they were going to start each class, how they were going to structure the lesson."

As school systems elsewhere carry out remote learning this fall, Green Dot's experience structuring remote learning last spring highlights three important lessons for building a coherent remote learning experience for teachers and students.

Showing teachers what remote learning looks like

Once it was clear that closures in the spring wouldn't be temporary, Green Dot gave teachers and students clear guidance on what remote learning would look like. The network's CAO said, "It was one thing to say, 'This is what you have to do.' [But then] we quickly mobilized our team centrally to say, 'We need to show people what this looks like.' And so we created an [instructional] model for that first week [of remote learning]."

Green Dot created a networkwide model that combined lessons students could complete on their own schedules, along with access to live teachers on a set bell schedule. The first step was setting clear expectations.

To clarify expectations further, the network developed a shared template for lessons. All lessons had to include slides (Powerpoint or Google Slides) with audio or video from the teacher describing the lesson's objective, standard, agenda, and activities ("so students hear you," the CAO explained). Lessons also had to have a processing activity and an exit slip. Teachers were expected to do biweekly assessments (e.g., quiz, short-answer response, or some other demonstration of learning). In addition to class time, teachers had to be available to students during office hours (teachers did not, however, have to be on video during office hours).

To help teachers with the new model, Green Dot created three "fully loaded" lessons in all core subject areas. These complete lessons included "the PowerPoint, and the audio, and the resources, and all the attachments that [teachers] could process . . . [and] tweak to make their own, and then they could use them to guide their next six weeks," the CAO said. Green Dot took a similarly structured approach to its advisory period, a daily meeting to support students' social and emotional well-being. The CAO explained,

All of our schools have an advisory program as a part of their school day. [During remote schooling] they kept their same advisor, so these are smaller sections of 25 to 30 kids max. . . . We have a team of five people at the home office producing daily lessons for advisory that are a mix, there's a college day, a goal-setting day, a mindfulness day.

Green Dot's centralized, structured approach was based on the belief that the network was "smarter moving as one unit than as 20 different schools, even though we all have unique needs," the CEO said. It also took some burden off educators. The CEO claimed that Green Dot's teachers "appreciated the amount of structure because there was so much they were dealing with in their own homes. The structure allowed them to just wrap their heads around

‘What is this going to look like?’” For students, she added, the consistent structure meant, “‘As a sixth grader, or seventh grader, or eighth grader, when I go into each of my classrooms I [as a student] don’t have to code switch.’”

Unlike most charter school networks, Green Dot’s California schools are voluntarily unionized—so leaders needed to work out any changes with its employees’ collective bargaining representatives. Early in the crisis, the two sides negotiated two “side letters” that outlined teachers’ new workdays and expectations for remote learning (the letters also paused teacher evaluations for the spring). According to network leaders, the consensus on both sides was that everyone wanted to get back to working with students. “That’s not to say there wasn’t a good amount of back and forth [with the union],” the CEO observed. “But I think ultimately, we landed with just about everything we thought was important for students and for staff, and so we feel good about that.”

Support and align teacher and system learning

Besides the “fully loaded” lessons and template, Green Dot’s central office provided teachers with eight days of professional development on remote learning before launching their virtual schools. Each day followed a similar schedule, opening with community-building activities, followed by a training module (e.g., on the remote learning lessons or an opportunity to rehearse leading a virtual advisory or get up to speed on cyber safety) and then planning time for teachers.

To support the transition to virtual schooling, Green Dot also phased in remote learning by including a “Week 0” of advisory classes only. This advisory-first approach emphasized the importance of social-emotional connections—and gave teachers more breathing room to adjust to their new roles and manage personal situations at home.

Besides training teachers to prepare for remote learning, Green Dot also started working with researchers at UCLA to collect data from teachers and students about their experiences. Weekly surveys went to teachers, staff, and students. Teacher and student focus groups provided further feedback. As the CEO said,

It’s just a way to get great ideas. Every time I go through this feedback process, somebody says something and I’m like, ‘I never thought of that before. Let’s put that on the list of things that we want to do.’

By showing teachers what remote learning looked like, providing aligned professional development, and collecting data to inform improvement, Green Dot was able to roll out and adapt its remote learning program across all of its schools.

While it was a work in progress, the approach helped harmonize the network’s remote learning effort—instruction, teacher training, student support, and data collection. Green Dot’s attempts at harmonization echoed the type of instructional program coherence known to support student learning and some of the predictability and consistency associated with trauma-informed approaches.

Increased collaboration and coordination across the organization

Green Dot's experience last spring shows what a structured and coherent approach to remote learning can look like. But getting there wasn't easy. It required extra levels of coordination and collaboration throughout the organization.

In the central office, responding to the crisis "really amplified" central office collaboration, according to the CAO. With events moving quickly, changes in one department had immediate ripple effects on others. Those ripple effects continued as the network planned for reopening in the fall. The CAO said,

Our task force for reopening schools is an example. There are probably 20 of us on that, across different departments . . . [while] there are people who literally might have nothing to contribute in an hour and a half meeting, they need to hear how everything is developing with this model because it's going to impact your plans for your department.

At the school level, principals started working together more closely, too. The CAO noted,

The cross-departmental collaboration at the home office is true at the school site level, too. Our principals are collaborating more than they did six months ago. And it's not because they didn't have things to share. It's just something about this environment and this shift has increased communication school to school, leader to leader, the same way it has at the home office.

Ironically, working remotely may have increased connections across the organization. Pre-COVID, for example, the traffic in Los Angeles made it hard to imagine gathering people together across the system. "To hop in a car in LA to get the group of principals together is very difficult," admitted the CAO. But virtual meetings broke down that barrier. "I think we need to change the way we think about how we convene people after all is said and done. . . . There's nothing wrong with virtual meetups on a regular basis."

Remote learning in fall 2020

In August, Green Dot California opened schools with full-day, remote learning for the 2020–21 school year. Its approach to reopening carried forward many of the strategies it used in the spring: setting clear expectations, providing aligned support, and collaborating. But the network also changed and improved its model based on lessons from the spring.

The biggest change: the network is offering full-day live instruction and interactive lessons. This shift to live instruction was, in part, a response to feedback from students last spring. At that time, the CAO said, "Students are telling us, 'That's important to me. I learn better when those two things [I can see and hear my teacher] are true at the same time.'" Teachers this fall will also take attendance every day. Students will receive traditional A–F grades. And parents will have access to assignments and grades throughout the school year. In other words, remote learning will look a little more like regular school.

To be sure, Green Dot's success last spring may have been a matter of scale: Would a structured approach have worked with more schools? Would it have been successful with a mix of elementary and secondary schools, instead of only middle and high schools? And despite

some successes, leaders admitted that questions remained last spring about how the program could better provide feedback to students, build opportunities to master standards, and serve students with disabilities and English language learners.

Still, the network managed to deliver the kind of structure and support that many teachers across the country say they wanted during a challenging time. It illustrates the benefits of leadership, direction, and organizational coherence in a time of crisis and uncertainty. And it's a proof point that, with leadership and collaboration, complex organizations can make major changes in short periods of time. As the CAO said, Green Dot's response to the crisis in the spring "basically has taught us that we can move a lot more quickly on things than we ever thought we could. . . . Let's not forget that when we're not in crisis mode because we can probably do things a lot more quickly than we thought."

As the virus surges, budgets tighten, and uncertainty remains, system leaders will need to stay nimble in the months ahead.

| About This Project

This is the first qualitative analysis released as part of the American School District Panel (ASDP)—a national effort by CRPE, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, and Kitamba to surface and examine trends in the policy and practice of school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs).

This groundbreaking effort will enable district and CMO leaders an opportunity to share their perspectives and contribute to decisions about education policy and practice. Researchers will survey leaders and staff from a representative panel of school districts and CMOs across the country, as well as conduct a complementary set of qualitative studies, following these districts and CMOs over time to monitor trends.

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While this analysis draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.