Lessons from the Pandemic, and Supporting our Students and Families as In-Person Learning Resumes
PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the heightened focus on racial injustice over the past year, has laid bare many of the challenges and inequities in our city and school system. While there were heroic efforts made by many of our teachers and schools, R.O.C.K. could see firsthand the mounting challenges our students and families faced to meet their basic needs, keep up with their academics, and care for their socio-emotional well-being. As we prepare to return to in-person learning this fall, R.O.C.K. wanted to take a more systematic look at the needs that have emerged in San Francisco’s Visitacion Valley so that we, along with our schools and other community partners, can best plan to meet those needs and help our students and families reconnect, repair, and regain their love of learning.

To that end, in the Spring of 2021, R.O.C.K. engaged Wicoff Consulting LLC to design and lead a study to assess the range of challenges and needs students and families may face upon reintegration to in-person learning. This memo presents findings and themes from the study, which included field research along with interviews, focus groups, and surveys with 7 district and city leaders, 48 school staff, 24 nonprofit staff, 33 families and 20 students.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Through this study, R.O.C.K. sought to learn:

- What are the biggest challenges or needs students and families are currently experiencing? What challenges or needs are anticipated in the fall?
- What resources and services are currently available to address student and family needs? What additional services or support is needed?
Through our research, 8 primary areas of concern arose - five with students (Mental Health, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Academics, School Connection, physical health) and three with families (basic needs, school communication, and school engagement). Of those, Mental Health, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Academics rose to the top across all of the groups we surveyed and spoke with. School connection, physical health and basic needs were a very high need as seen by teachers and nonprofits, but less acute in student and family surveys. Finally, school communication and family engagement were cited as a clear challenge during distance learning, but less of a priority and expected to significantly improve with full in-person learning in the fall.

School staff and community leaders overwhelmingly expressed concern for student mental health and social-emotional wellbeing, and named this as an area in which they anticipate students will need additional support as they return to school in person. Students frequently expressed these issues in terms of struggling to focus and experiencing heightened anxiety.

**Survey results: Top 3 issues Students and Families reported experiencing or that Teachers and Nonprofits reported as a significant concern**

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<th>STUDENTS</th>
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<th>TEACHERS</th>
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Staff and students both commented on the need to socialize, play, and connect with peers after spending much of the past year isolated from one another. Concerns about limited academic progress were also raised by all we interviewed and surveyed. Many school and nonprofit staff named noticeable gaps in opportunities or support for some students this past year, and students cited academics as one of their biggest challenges. However, teachers are hesitant to place too much focus on the "learning loss" narrative as it creates additional pressure for students and schools and fails to acknowledge nontraditional learning that did occur.

For families, many school and community stakeholders also referenced a dramatic increase in unmet basic needs. While fewer families in our survey reported significant unmet basic needs, many are still experiencing uncertainties with employment and housing. Families and staff alike noted the challenges with school communication throughout the pandemic, and the difficulty of having meaningful family engagement while on lock-down. While many expect these challenges to improve with the return to in-person learning, families still note communication challenges with the school, including language barriers, that are persisting as we prepare to return.
DETAILED FINDINGS

Tier 1 Concerns

Social Emotional Learning, and socialization in particular, was named as a major area of need exacerbated by the pandemic. Many students have had little social interaction over the past 15 months. For the students who utilized the option to return to school in the spring, teachers and nonprofit staff noticed that many were having difficulty initiating play or establishing new friendships. Universally, respondents felt that students would benefit from opportunities to play and socialize and make connections with peers and adults in a structured environment.

The most frequent thing students mentioned that they are looking forward to in the fall is being with friends and making new friends. But they equally often mentioned the challenge of socializing, especially after the isolation of COVID.

Teachers and families also spoke of concerns around students experiencing too much screen time over the past year. This may have contributed to students struggling to focus. 65% of students surveyed reported having difficulty concentrating in class - even after in person learning resumed. Students are no longer in the habit of dealing with noise and distractions from their peers. That, coupled with a heightened ability to disengage and/or multi-task in remote learning, has eroded some of their skills around staying focused in the classroom.

Additional social-emotional areas were also mentioned, such as building self-confidence and self-awareness, a need for positive role models, and support with conflict resolution.

Mental Health is a concern that impacts all other areas (academic performance and socialization in particular). Students are showing an increase in trauma and anxiety as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing racism. Many have experienced familial loss, isolation, fear, and bias and need time and space to heal and process.

88% of teachers surveyed cited mental health as of “great concern” and the other 12% cited it as of “some concern,” making it the highest rated issue for teachers in our survey.

“People are hard. Talking to people and making new friends [is challenging]. COVID has made me not used to being around others. Overthinking happens.” - Middle School Student

“Youth and adults need time to process what has happened during the pandemic. From COVID to ongoing violence towards communities of color from our law enforcement institutions, to general loss of relationships in a myriad of ways, our communities need to heal. Young people need opportunities to heal and derive meaning from this period.” - Community Partner
Nonprofit staff rated mental health equally high. As one teacher noted, the consistent messaging over the past year was one of fear - other people aren’t safe, school isn’t safe, the police aren’t safe - which can have a profound impact on the mental state of a young person. Nonprofit staff added that many students' home environments were not conducive to healing and self care, or at worst may be contributing factors to trauma.

We did not explicitly ask students and families about their experience of mental health or trauma to respect their privacy, but we did ask students about their levels of stress or anxiety. Half of our students said they were experiencing some or a lot of anxiety, which was often exacerbated by school related factors such as tests or feeling behind in their work.

"I am re-framing the “learning loss” narrative, as we as adults need to be flexible to our young people’s needs and not place negative labels or unrealistic expectations on youth.”
- Community Partner

were concerned that focusing too much on the learning that was “lost” over the past year creates additional pressure on students at a time when they need greater flexibility and recognition of all the nontraditional learning that did occur. “I am re-framing the “learning loss” narrative, as we as adults need to be flexible to our young people’s needs and not place negative labels or unrealistic expectations on youth.”
- Community Partner

Academics was also a high priority for students and families. Interestingly, as in the findings in social emotional learning, academics is both the number one goal students have for themselves for the fall, and an area that over half of them cited as a challenge. However, several students noted receiving support from their family, a teacher, their friends, or another adult, both in achieving their goals and overcoming or addressing their challenges. One student said, “I didn’t fall behind in school because of help from my mom and dad.”

Families also saw academics as an area of concern and ranked “Getting a better understanding of how my student is doing academically and socially and how I can support them at home” as the area of highest interest for additional support. But similar to the students, families shared genuine appreciation and gratitude for teachers and school staff. They feel that teachers and staff care for their children, ensure their safety, and take the time to provide individual attention and support.
Tier 2 Concerns

Physical activity significantly decreased for students during the pandemic. School and nonprofit staff noted that many kids have gained weight and had limited access to outdoor activity. Students missed sports and named it as a primary vehicle for physical activity. Many mentioned being inactive during COVID and not having opportunities to be outside.

“I get tired easily. Healthy food would help me.” - Middle School Student

“I don’t get that active. I want to spend more time outside.” - Middle School Student

Even upon return to in-person learning, some of those students received additional academic support during recess, cutting into their physically active time. And as noted in the SEL section, students are having a harder time initiating play and resolving conflicts that occur on the playground. Taking time to rebuild these skills takes some time away from the physical activity and play itself.

School Connection suffered through this period with students more disengaged from their classes and school community. Teachers noted that students were withdrawn or distracted in class, not completing assignments and appearing to lack motivation, especially to learn online. 40% of students shared that perspective, noting they had some or a lot of difficulty finding motivation to do school work. Many struggled to get started with an assignment, especially in distance learning, but said that teachers and parents holding them accountable helped them overcome the challenge.

School staff also noted that students entering a new school (kindergarteners, 6th graders, and newcomers or transfer students) have had an entire year without setting foot in their school building. For many, that means they have had to navigate making new friends online and try to learn new school routines virtually. They are also less likely to be connected to administrative and support staff who were not in their virtual classrooms.

Unmet basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare increased dramatically through the pandemic due to underemployment and financial instability. Insufficient access to childcare and the internet also exacerbated the challenges of caring for multiple children navigating virtual school.

However, the acute nature of the need appears to be subsiding with only 6% of families surveyed saying they had “some challenge” meeting basic needs and none saying they had “a lot of challenge.” When asked about challenges with unstable housing or employment, 12% expressed “some challenge” but only 3% expressed “a lot of challenge.” While these numbers are still troubling, they are a clear improvement from the height of the pandemic.
However, it should be noted that the families surveyed were already connected to R.O.C.K. programs and cited their deep appreciation for the role R.O.C.K. and other organizations played in helping them connect to resources over the past year. It is likely that there is still a segment of families who aren’t connected to R.O.C.K. services that are still experiencing higher levels of challenge than is reflected in these results.

**Tier 3 Concerns**

School communication proved challenging over the last year. Consistently, school staff and nonprofits alike cited how much the pandemic created or exacerbated communication challenges with families. The challenges were in both directions. Schools found it harder to reach families because there was no longer the informal communication that would naturally happen at drop-off and pick-up and there were no school events to draw families onto campus. Nonprofit staff frequently heard from families that they found it harder to navigate partial or conflicting information from the schools and district, decreasing their trust in both the message and the messenger.

In our survey, families cited this as one of the areas of highest continued challenge and several cited language barriers as one of the underlying issues with communication.

**School engagement** in general declined. The communication challenges were one piece of a larger puzzle many school partners cited of the challenge with eroding trust and lower family engagement in school. School and nonprofit staff felt that parents didn’t know how to advocate for their child’s (and their family’s) needs in the remote setting and thus weren’t always getting the resources their child deserved. Also, they heard that parents didn’t feel like they were personally able to effectively support their student’s remote learning, and many others had so many conflicting demands that they couldn’t engage as much as remote learning required.

In our survey, family members generally felt like they didn’t have issues being engaged - with only 3% saying they had challenges connecting to the school community. But the second most frequently cited area where they would like support was “Help with getting my student the right supports at school,” indicating a continued need to have support in advocating for their child’s needs.
ADDRESSING THE GAPS

The overall goal of this project is to ensure our students and families receive the support they need as in-person school resumes. Based on our findings, we seek to add resources to our traditional program offering to address as many of the identified areas of need as possible and for which R.O.C.K. has expertise. We will utilize partners to assist with areas for which we do not. We are hopeful to make progress in this process of transitioning and healing and believe a year of additional support and resources will provide a great deal of positive impact. At the end of the year, we will re-evaluate the health and wellbeing of our students and families to determine the necessity of continuing to fill those identified gaps in service.

A large portion of the findings (socialization, physical activity, SEL, etc.) are in the sweet spot of our offerings and we will continue to host our traditional programs (in-school support, after school programs, weekend activities, summer camps), but with additional resources and an increased focus on the identified deficit areas. To address academic challenges, we will build upon our standard school-based programs which include literacy intervention during the school day, homework assistance and reading support during our after school programs, and a reading loss prevention program throughout the summer. While deep mental health is not an area of our expertise, general wellness is. Our schools recognize that the need for wellness support will increase in the upcoming year. In response, we will add 2 wellness specialists per school site (6 total) and 1 wellness coordinator.

Furthermore, we have identified available resources and gaps in services at each school site and are seeking ways to provide additional support as follows:

- **El Dorado Elementary School** - Deep mental health support and academics are priorities at this school. We are looking into partners to provide therapy and case management to address mental health challenges. To address academic deficiencies, we are exploring placing our staff in teachers’ classrooms to provide one-on-one or small group support as well as increasing our in-school literacy intervention work.

- **Visitacion Valley Elementary School** - This school has plenty of mental health partners and a strong approach to academics. However, they anticipate the need for additional wellness support and can see the benefit of creating a wellness center. Our 2 additional wellness specialists could satisfy the need of the school to host a full wellness center.

- **Visitacion Valley Middle School** - This school was one of three schools to receive Expanded Mental Health Services funding for this upcoming year and thus will not require our focus for mental health support. They have noted that a neglect of students’ physical health (e.g. physicals, vision, dental) has been an issue because of the pandemic. We are seeking partners to provide physical health services. In addition, we are exploring ways to better support academic intervention.

With so many uncertainties over the past 15+ months, we can only predict the challenges and deficits our students and families will face and how they will respond to our proposed solutions. Through continued communications with our key stakeholders, we will regularly monitor the state of our community and are prepared to shift our resources and bring in new resources as necessary.
About this Study

Methods

Three primary methods were used to gather information about student and family needs.

Field Research. An initial review of relevant literature on the impact of COVID-19 and distance learning on students and families was conducted to surface a preliminary list of challenges and deficit areas.

Interviews, Focus Groups, and Surveys of Key Stakeholders. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with city leaders, school partners, nonprofit organizations, and R.O.C.K. staff. Interviews and focus groups explored stakeholders’ observations of student and family needs, awareness of available services to meet these needs, and opinions about what services and supports would be most critical in the coming school year.

Surveys of Students and Families. After analyzing data from the stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and surveys, student and family surveys were administered to R.O.C.K. summer program participants to better understand student goals and interests for the coming year, barriers and challenges students and families are currently experiencing, and areas where they’d like additional support.

Participant Overview

- City leaders: Interviewed 3 district leaders, 4 city leaders
- School partners: Interviewed/met with 2 administrators, 5 social workers/wellness staff, 5 other school staff; Surveyed 36 teachers
- Nonprofits: Surveyed 13 staff from other San Francisco youth-serving nonprofits; Interviewed/met with 11 R.O.C.K. staff
- Families: Surveyed 33 parents and guardians
- Students: Surveyed 20 students

ABOUT R.O.C.K.

Real Options for City Kids (R.O.C.K.) is an award-winning nonprofit that provides positive opportunities for children who need it most in San Francisco’s Visitacion Valley. For over 26 years, we have worked to promote social justice and racial equity among our youth. R.O.C.K. serves over 900 participants each year with a framework that develops healthy social and emotional skills, instills strong academic behaviors, and broadens horizons. Our year-round programs are fully integrated into all public schools in our community and feature a combination of academic support, learning enrichment, sports and fitness activities, outdoor adventures, and summer camp opportunities. For more information, visit www.rocksf.org.