

## Educational Supports for Children of Color during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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What were the experiences of Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) families of color during the COVID-19 pandemic and what support did they access? Drawing from in-depth interviews with 31 individuals, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) mothers from varied economic circumstances, school staff, and representatives of community-based or faith-based organizations (CBOs), we found that families of color experienced challenges related to virtual schooling, childcare, economic security, and physical and emotional wellbeing during the 2020-21 school year. They accessed support from other families, CBO staff, and schools, including support for students' remote learning, emotional support and care, and provision of food and childcare. This brief highlights commonalities and divergences in the experiences of MMSD's diverse families of color.

### Major findings

#### Challenges for BIPOC Families During COVID-19

Families of color have faced numerous, intersecting challenges during the pandemic, with participants commonly citing economic precarity, childcare, schooling, and health.

- Many families of color have experienced job loss, furlough, or reduced hours, creating economic precarity. As a CBO program leader explained, "most of our families lost their jobs or had to stay home for a period of three to five months." Many families found it difficult to pay for rent, utilities, food, and clothing.
- With schools and some childcare facilities closed, and concerns about the spread of COVID-19, childcare was also a critical challenge noted by almost all mothers. One school staff member explained: "[A] lot of the families that I work with are essential workers...having their kids at home while also continuing to work their in-person essential worker jobs has been a huge challenge."
- Virtual schooling was also a concern, with participants particularly noting that it did not hold children's interest.
- Finally, in terms of health, families have struggled with contracting COVID-19 and ensuring their children are safe in their virtual schooling sites and neighborhoods. Students and families also experienced mental and emotional strains, including anger, stress, frustration, isolation, and grief connected to the pandemic, virtual schooling, and economic precarity, as well as to racial violence.

#### Supports and Characteristics

Supports commonly cited as helpful for BIPOC families include support for students' remote learning, provision of food, emotional support, care, and concern, and provision of childcare.

- MMSD teachers, CBOs, and learning pods assisted BIPOC families by supporting remote learning. Despite frustrations with remote learning, many mothers spoke favorably of teachers who provided additional support for their children. One mother said: "Even after class is over, you click to the chat room and your teacher will still be in there, and you can get help." CBO staff offered students WiFi, technology, and support. A CBO staff member who ran a school-day program said: "Because of our relationship with the school, we knew that when kids weren't attending with us, that they weren't logging onto Zooms from home, so we were able to...make sure that's happening." Additionally, most mothers supported their children's learning with "real world," family-centered learning (e.g. cooking, culturally relevant activities, physical activity, learning in nature).
- District staff, CBOs, and families collaborated to meet families' basic needs, especially food needs. One school staff member explained: "with COVID it has been a big part of my role driving around town and just bringing things to people and organizing, not just me, lots of

volunteers.” Several interviewees noted the usefulness of (and need for) flexible, or “no strings attached,” support to more effectively enable families to meet basic needs.

- Families, CBO staff, and school staff offered emotional support, care, and concern through one-on-one relationships, counseling services, and/or going beyond their professional roles to know families. One mother became emotional when describing the support offered by her case manager and her kids’ schools: “...I felt like between my case manager and my kids’ schools...We all became family...with them dealing with my kids we built the relationship to the point where I can trust them and if we needed any type of support we got it.”
- Childcare helped families juggling both employment and childcare needs. The school-day childcare and support for remote learning offered by CBOs was particularly helpful for single mothers. Mothers balanced receiving childcare support from neighbors, family members, or friends, with limiting contacts outside of their household to keep their children safe.
- Other key supports included: learning opportunities beyond school curriculum; assistance with housing/rent, internet, and utilities; information-sharing about opportunities and resources; and educational support. Other parents, school staff, and CBO staff served as boundary-spanners between families and schools, assisting with communication, advocacy for students, and personalized help in navigating institutions and resources.

### Impacts and Recommendations for MMSD Schools

Most participants indicated positive impacts of these supports, especially related to relationship building and strengthening among families, school staff, and/or with CBO staff, and emotional support. Other positive impacts identified by participants include: meeting food or housing needs, having childcare, relieving stress, and accessing technology. Participants also noted mixed or negative impacts of support, such as when food was not of high quality, culturally appropriate, or excessive when other needs went unmet.

Many participants highlighted changes they desired in educational support for BIPOC students, notably increases in culturally relevant pedagogy, increased representation of BIPOC staff, and more opportunities for BIPOC families and community members to participate in decision-making. They also called for improved communication and collaboration between schools, government agencies, and CBOs to better support children’s learning and families’ basic needs. Several CBO staff wanted more MMSD communication around district practices and to share their insights on students and families.

Improved collaboration and communication could address some of the bigger challenges families have faced. Interviewees offered several actionable ideas, such as:

- Increasing access to summer school given the ongoing impacts of the pandemic
- One-on-one mentoring or tutoring, especially with those who represent students’ backgrounds, through partnerships with CBOs
- More opportunities for Black parent relationship-building without the involvement of school staff
- Creating more spaces for BIPOC parents and students to have “voice” in school decision-making, including around curricula and representation in educational materials
- Providing free WiFi access and internet-connected laptops to all families
- Easing bureaucratic requirements for groups partnering with MMSD and for how money can be spent to support families

Our research identified the positive impacts and the central role that schools played in supporting families during the pandemic and highlighted how schools can continue to support families moving forward. The data also revealed family-to-family and community-based efforts that have provided crucial resources and support for some BIPOC families during the pandemic. The school district plays a central role in supporting a mainly BIPOC student population’s learning and family well-being and can strengthen their role by also supporting family-to-family and CBO efforts. The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism have created incredible challenges for many, but also provide lessons for this year and beyond about how schools, families and communities can move forward together.