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San Francisco Learning Hubs Helping Most Vulnerable Students

by [Kara Yorio](#)

Oct 26, 2020 | Filed in [News & Features](#)

As the pandemic continued, and it became clear that the 2020-21 school year was going to at least begin with remote learning in San Francisco, something needed to be done for the most vulnerable students in the San Francisco Unified School District.

“We wanted to figure out a way to make sure we stopped the academic and social-emotional avalanche that was going to happen for our highest need children,” says San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and their Families (DCYF) director Maria Su.



In March, DCYF created physical sites where some students could be during the school day, to help get logged into school and allow their parents to go to work. The initiative was successful, and there were no cases of COVID among the kids. Heading into the

fall, that system needed to ramp up to help as many students as possible who were falling through the cracks and falling behind in their education.

With city and state pandemic health restrictions on the number of people allowed in an indoor space, DCYF needed to know which kids needed the support most.

“We’re lucky in San Francisco, we work very closely with our school district,” says Su.

This coverage is free for all visitors. Your support makes this possible  The district collected data during the spring—measuring the number of children who accessed or opened any digital format, e.g., those who joined Zoom, clicked on the emails, submitted homework—and shared the

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list of those who struggled the most. DCYF supplemented the data by reaching out to their government partners, including public housing authorities to help find the struggling students, many of whom are homeless, living in public housing, or in foster care. DCYF also had established relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide after-school programs such as the YMCA and Boys & Girls Club, as well as the city's libraries and parks and recreation department.

“We were able to very quickly pivot and think outside the box, because we didn't have to work on building the trusting relationships,” says Su. “We already had [them], so it was easier for us to be innovative and creative. It just speaks to how this pandemic really does highlight the importance of city government to be collaborative. When you don't have that, I don't even know how I would be able to create that initiative.”

On September 14, SFDCYF launched Phase I with 55 sites opened to 1,100 students. Two San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) locations were part of the initial rollout.

“With approximately 26,000 San Francisco Unified School District students on free or reduced lunch, I cannot think of any higher or better use of our library system's organizational resources than to support the educational success of the most vulnerable populations of school-age children in our community,” city librarian Michael Lambert wrote in an email. “We are proud to serve and be a part of the village making this happen for San Francisco's youth and families.”

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Only one of the sites can also operate SFPL curbside pick-up service and maintain proper safety precautions. Each cohort of students had a maximum of 14 kids with two adult staff educators charged with helping them log in to classes and do their work, along with enrichment like arts and crafts, music, and more. SFPL staff was there to help the educators with any needs from the library or building. They provide one more thing, too, according to Lambert—a smiling face to welcome them to the library

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each day. And SFPL staff is happy to have them. Benjamin Cohen, manager and children's librarian at the Richmond branch, told Lambert that it was "wonderful" to see children in the library building again.

The kids were happy to be around each other—talking, laughing, logging into class, playing outside, and returning to the same place and same people the next day.

“For the homeless kids, the most stable part of these children's lives is the learning hub,” says Su, who has heard from many appreciative parents and guardians. Some told her they were about to quit their job to help their children with school, others



were happy to have the logistical help with school after a spring that was such a struggle. They often gave up. It was particularly hard on bilingual families and grandparents raising kids, says Su.

“Some of the kids haven't logged in since March,” she says. “They have missed 100 homework assignments.”

The learning hubs are expensive to run. They have to open the actual location, pay everyone involved, and keep the number of students down to meet pandemic restrictions.

“It's a very expensive model,” says Su.

It is also particularly difficult for the adult educators who must monitor as many as 14 different kids with 14 different schedules. If it were possible to create cohorts that were in the same school, that would make things easier, according to Su. Despite the expense and challenges, Su knows the city's kids need this program.

“At the end of the day, it's the right thing to do,” she says. “We are losing a whole year of education for these children. We're going to have a group of kids who are fine and another who are going to be severely behind.”

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The learning hubs are doing their best to get the kids they can serve caught up, and they have been a success so far—not only with education and socialization, but no student has gotten sick. A few adult staff

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members have tested positive for the coronavirus, but the city's health department has done contact tracing and found the cases were not from the learning hub. Sites have closed down until deemed safe again, but overall, everything has run well and without significant interruption.

After seeing the benefit of Phase I of the learning hubs, the school district created a new list of students in need and reached out to families to register them for Phase II, which begins this week and is open to 1,000 more students at additional sites, including two more library locations.

"The students I've seen have been engaged in learning and other activities and are happy to be with their peers," said Lambert. "It's anything but a quiet library when the students are there—there is a lot of laughter and enjoyment. The CBOs offer a full day of activities, including dedicated distance learning time on their laptops, music, art and dance, outdoor playtime at the neighboring playgrounds dedicated to the hubs, plus quiet meditation times and reading times. And, of course, who wouldn't want to spend their day in a library, right?"



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