



Doing What’s Best For Kids: Breakthrough’s Response to the Pandemic

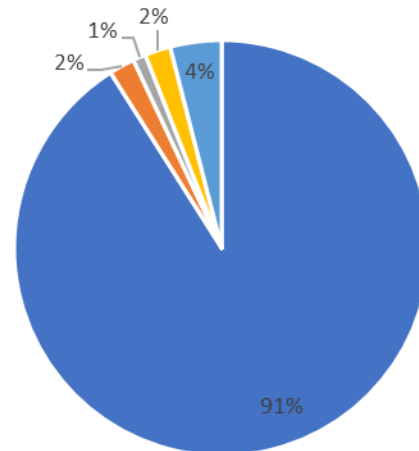
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Introduction

In fall 2018, Breakthrough Public Schools (Breakthrough), a Cleveland-based charter management organization, received a federal Charter School Programs (CSP) grant to disseminate best practices. Then 16 months into its CSP dissemination grant, Breakthrough, like school districts across the country, closed its doors due to the pandemic and shelter in place order. Breakthrough school buildings sat silent as children and families throughout Cleveland awaited news of schools returning to normal.

Breakthrough was established in 2010 and operates 12 charter schools in predominantly under-resourced communities in Cleveland, Ohio. Breakthrough has historically located new schools in neighborhoods lacking high-quality seats, which has taken precedence over locations with better school facility options. Its six school buildings are situated in areas known as Opportunity Zones, which the [U.S. Department of](#)

Breakthrough Students



■ African American ■ Latinx ■ Asian ■ White ■ Multiracial



excellence in research, development, and service

Education defined as “economically distressed communities.” Breakthrough currently enrolls over 3,600 K-8 scholars who are predominantly low-income (70%) and ethnically underrepresented (98%).

Prior to the pandemic, Breakthrough school buildings opened as early as 7:00am and stayed open until as late as 6:00pm when hosting after school activities, and over 800 K-8 scholars regularly filled the halls at its most populated campus, Village and Entrepreneurship Preparatory Cliffs. All six school buildings offered after school tutoring, aftercare programs, and enrichment activities (e.g., basketball, technology clubs) on site since their inception.



In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced these bustling buildings to close their doors, leaving staff, scholars, and families wondering how scholars would be served, what learning would look like during the pandemic, and how high-quality

educational opportunities would be maintained. This paper presents Breakthrough’s response to serving scholars during the COVID-19 pandemic when school buildings shut down and describes how the organization is striving to maintain a high-quality education for scholars and families.

Breakthrough’s Response to Families

Breakthrough implemented multiple strategies to meet the needs of families and scholars during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced its school buildings to close on March 13, 2020. The pandemic exacerbated families’ needs, which ranged from food insecurity to lack of access to

technology to the potential for learning loss brought about by scholars being isolated at home, particularly because many Breakthrough parents were required to return to work and childcare was a concern. In response to growing needs and through a desire to continue serving scholars and their families, Breakthrough provided:



Meals to scholars



Access to technology



Technology support



In-person Learning Centers



Professional development tailored for distance teaching and learning



Meal Distribution. Since their inception, Breakthrough schools provided breakfast and lunch to all scholars who qualified under the federal free- and reduced-price lunch program (FRLP). Breakthrough modified its meal program at the onset of the pandemic by providing meals to all scholars to ensure their well-being, regardless of their FRLP status. Breakthrough leaders moved quickly to offer boxed meals to all scholars beginning on Monday, March 16, 2020, which was the next school day after buildings closed three days earlier on Friday.

Breakthrough worked with its existing food service vendor to maintain its meal services. On any given day, school staff across the network distributed meals to an average of 600 scholars (about 100 scholars per campus), giving families the opportunity to pick up meals at the closest school. Breakthrough communicated pickup times to families primarily through text messages, social media, and the *Remind* program, which is a communication platform that helps educators disseminate information to students and parents via real-time individual, groups, or class text messages. Staff distributed meals from the main office of each of its six school

buildings, following CDC guidelines for social distancing and frequently sanitizing surfaces. As the pandemic continued, Breakthrough modified its meal distribution services to reduce families' daily trips to the school and began providing several packaged meals at once and offering this service two days per week.

Additionally, several community agencies came together to ensure families in need received food support. For example, Breakthrough partnered with the [Greater Cleveland Food Bank](#), which provided backpacks containing shelf-stable meals to families weekly in Spring 2020. The Food Bank delivered the backpacks to one school site, and Breakthrough's cleaning and business solutions vendor picked up the backpacks and moved the supplies from campus to campus. This service was available at no-cost to Breakthrough, as the Greater Cleveland Food Bank serves many schools and districts throughout the region as part of their regular program. School staff communicated the distribution of backpacks using Remind, social media, and in-person to families already picking up packaged breakfasts and lunches. All six Breakthrough campuses participated in this effort, and approximately 700 backpacks were distributed weekly.



Access to Technology. According to the [Fordham Institute](#), “Kids from low incomes are three times more likely not to have consistent access to a device (32 percent vs. 10 percent).” Breakthrough originally estimated 15% of its scholars lacked internet access at home, based on reports from local districts serving a similar student population, although the need turned out to be much greater months into the pandemic. An immediate priority for Breakthrough was ensuring scholars were able to participate in distance learning as soon as possible. To roll out a remote learning plan, it was critical for all scholars and educators to have access to a reliable internet connection. Therefore, Breakthrough initially purchased over 620 hotspots to provide

internet connectivity for families and educators, and worked with DigitalC, a local nonprofit that provides internet access to low-income neighborhoods in Cleveland. Breakthrough and DigitalC were familiar with each other, as they serve a similar population in the same footprint; as such, establishing a partnership was a natural fit to better serve the community. Breakthrough was also motivated to assist with connectivity in the hopes that a hotspot in the home could help with other family needs. For example, hotspots were useful for older siblings in high school, younger siblings in preschool, and family members who needed access to WiFi in the home. As remote learning continued through the summer and into the 2020-2021 school year, Breakthrough leaders determined a greater number of scholars required hotspots to stay connected at home. Breakthrough continued to fundraise and purchased additional hotspots in batches as needed, overall acquiring 1,570 hotspots for scholars and their families.

Before the pandemic, Breakthrough was close to having one device (Chromebook, laptop, or iPad) per scholar across the network, and only required a small number of additional devices to achieve one-to-one with all scholars.

Breakthrough's technology department was supported by a team of interns who checked every device to ensure they were ready to deploy.

Breakthrough then distributed



the devices to all scholars who did not have one, resulting in one-to-one technology for 100% of its scholars by April 2020.

Similar to the approach for meal distribution, individual schools communicated pickup times to all families. Families came to their school building and picked up devices and hotspots (as needed) directly from the front office. Breakthrough ensured continued learning after the academic year ended by allowing scholars to keep devices over the summer. Breakthrough distributed devices and hotspots to new scholars who enrolled throughout the summer and into the 2020-21 school year. As of April 2021, Breakthrough distributed over 3,600 devices, demonstrating a need for technology and connectivity significantly higher than originally anticipated.



Technology Support to Families. In April 2020, Breakthrough launched the Virtual Call Center (VCC) to support families with technology-related issues. The VCC responded to over 450 phone calls—a combination of live calls and voicemails—in spring of 2020. The types of questions addressed during the calls included internet connection issues, obtaining logins for academic programs, and other remote learning questions. VCC staff also supported the onboarding of newly enrolled scholars by assessing their technology needs, providing access to a device, walking them through the programs needed to complete schoolwork, and designating hotspots to be picked up from school sites. Breakthrough had one of only two such call centers in the state of Ohio in spring 2020; only [24% of districts nationally established a call center or help desk](#) by the opening of Breakthrough's VCC. In addition, Breakthrough staff reached out to all families that reported connectivity issues to ensure they received what they needed.

Breakthrough also created a [webpage](#) containing distance learning and technology information for families. The website was designed to assist families and scholars with basic

troubleshooting as Breakthrough first rolled out its distance learning plan. To date, the webpage has over 5,700 views.



In-person Learning Centers. In September 2020, Breakthrough opened In-person Learning Centers (ILCs), which provided a safe space for scholars to learn remotely, interact with peers, and be supervised by qualified adults while families were working. Breakthrough created the ILCs to address feedback from families balancing employment obligations and



concerns about their children having to participate in distance learning from home without supervision.

All six Breakthrough facilities offered ILCs and altogether served approximately 475 scholars during the 2020-21 school year. When the ILCs first opened, the six campuses served 350 scholars and steadily increased enrollment over the school year, until reaching 475 in spring 2021. Breakthrough partnered with Open Doors Academy (ODA) to serve as the administrator of the ILCs and to offer after school enrichment programs. ODA staff members supervised small

groups of scholars in safe, socially distanced classrooms, where they completed schoolwork through their devices much like the scholars who were learning from home. Scholars received breakfast and lunch in the ILCs through the schools' food service vendor. Each classroom with

one adult served a maximum of nine scholars to comply with CDC guidelines. In spring 2021, ODA and Breakthrough agreed to add staff to support ILC classes of kindergarten scholars, as the younger scholars required more support than older ones. The ILCs operated 8:30am-3:00pm Tuesday through Friday, with before and after school offerings extending building availability from 7:30am-4:30pm. Attendance was taken daily and school leaders and front office staff were also in every building.

ODA staff members provided scholars in the ILCs technology support, answered scholar questions during independent learning, and ensured classroom safety. The ILCs were funded by private foundation grants.

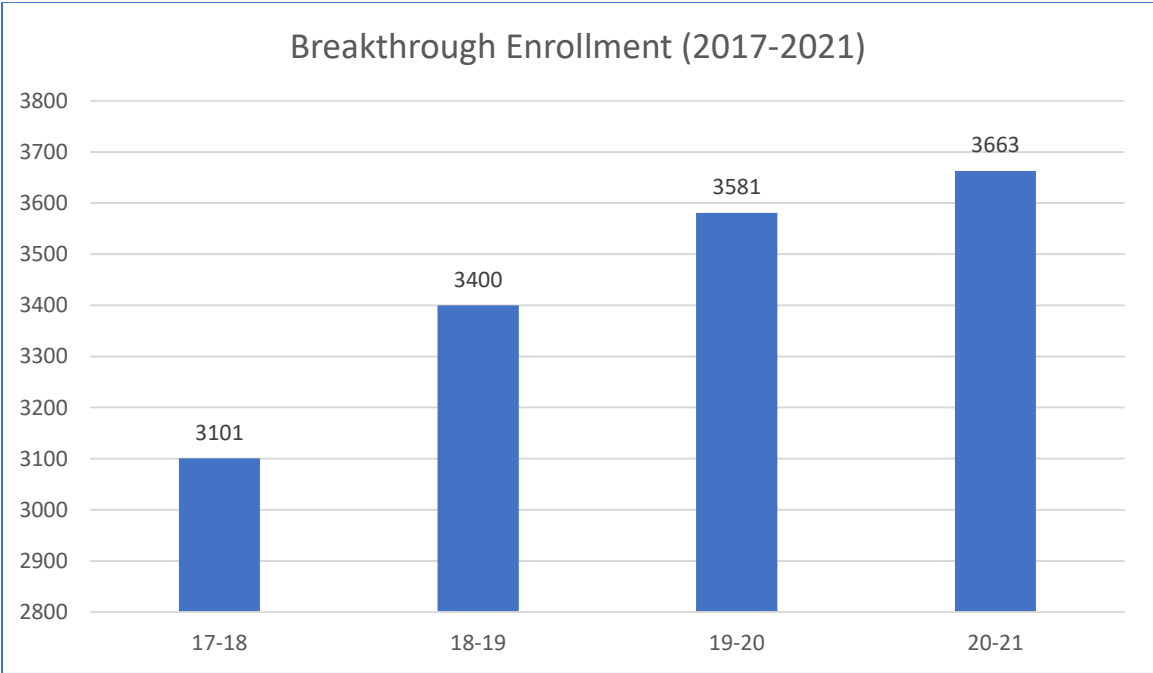


Professional Learning for Educators. Breakthrough educators participated in four weeks of virtual training in summer 2020 to prepare for remote learning in the 2020-21 school year (compared to 2.5 weeks of training offered by other local school districts), along with continued professional development throughout the school year. Although Breakthrough typically offers four weeks of professional development leading up to the beginning of the school year, the emphasis on remote learning demonstrated the commitment all educators and staff had to making this a successful program. Different from previous years, sessions covered remote learning topics such as launching culturally responsive digital classrooms, creating remote coaching and support structures, and co-teaching in the remote classroom. Similar to previous years, sessions also focused on curriculum, assessments, trauma-informed care, and differentiation. These sessions had remote learning specifications weaved throughout due to the circumstances of the school year.

It is also worth noting that during this same timeframe, the Breakthrough network was implementing its academic improvement plan, *One Breakthrough*. Under this plan, the network unified its three separate academic models and created a network academic team. Plan implementation allowed for stronger professional development offerings and more consistency across the network, among other efficiencies.

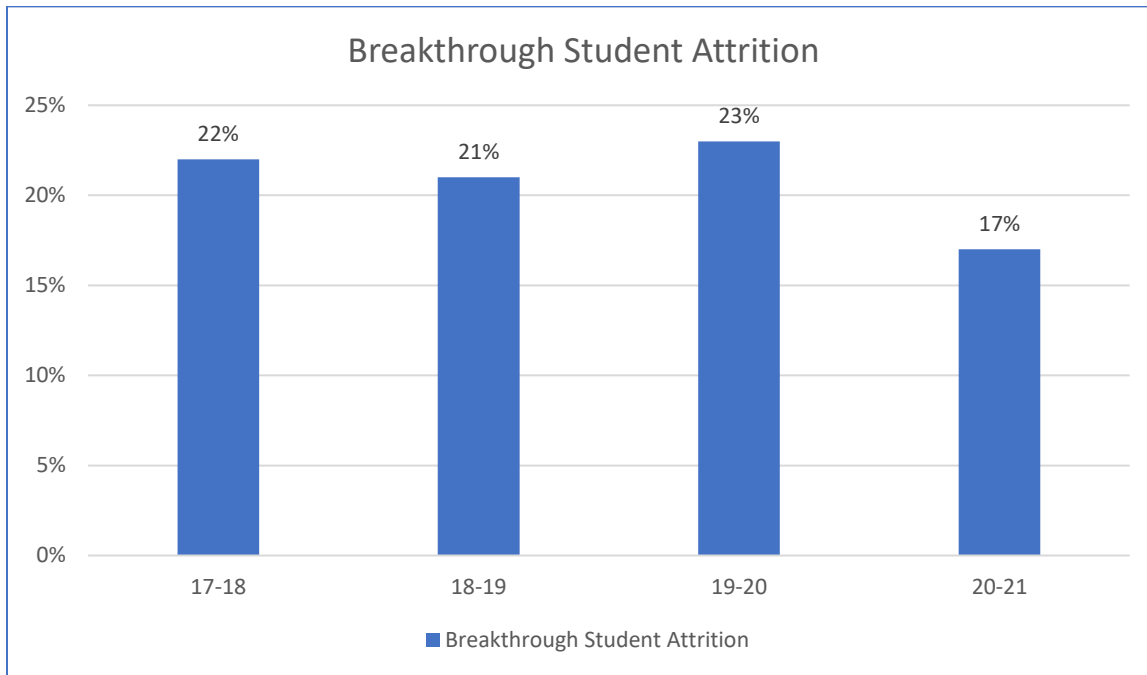
Positive Highlights during the Pandemic

Breakthrough’s efforts resulted in positive outcomes for scholars and families. First, enrollment increased by 2% from the 2019-20 school year to the 2020-21 school year and is higher than it has been in the last four years.



Daily attendance also increased from 92.8% to 94.1%, a 1.3 percentage point improvement over the previous year. Chronic absenteeism decreased 4.1 percentage points from the previous year. Attrition dropped from the previous school year, indicating families approved of the learning and support their children were receiving. Whereas the attrition rate was typically above 20% in the

previous four years, it decreased to 17% during the 2020-21 school year. Additionally, net attrition over this same time was positive as Breakthrough enrolled more scholars than it lost. Further, more scholars were enrolled in a Breakthrough school in May 2020 than at the beginning of the school year.



Another positive indicator was that family satisfaction results were the highest in Breakthrough history. Breakthrough attributed these outcomes to several factors, including a) staff commitment to scholars and families, b) staff ability to pivot to remote learning, c) Breakthrough’s ability to provide technology access, and d) Breakthrough’s partnerships with local businesses and organizations. In October 2020, when Breakthrough launched its family engagement survey to gauge perceptions regarding remote learning, 95% of families reported they were equipped with the necessary and critical digital learning tools for remote learning. Additionally, 76% of families reported Breakthrough was providing a quality remote learning

environment.¹ Following the survey, Breakthrough staff reached out to respondents who did not answer favorably to ensure families had what they needed and to answer any questions about the remote learning plan.

Breakthrough also streamlined its communication strategies during the pandemic. All schools in the network now use Remind to send out two to three communications every month.

Additionally, every school sends out a weekly newsletter to families. Breakthrough started conducting virtual home visits, which was a major shift during the pandemic. In previous years, schools



in the network had varied approaches in how they communicated with families. The modified communication approach enabled families to come to expect the communication, which contributed to a sense of trust and strengthened the home-school relationship.

Breakthrough was one of 12 charter and district schools in the United States profiled by Bellwether Education Partners in their latest report, [*Promise in the Time of Quarantine: Exploring Schools' Responses to COVID-19*](#). Breakthrough was highlighted for ensuring scholars rapidly had access to the appropriate technology. The report also indicated that a “big

¹ The survey focused on five areas: culture and connectedness, critical digital learning tools, quality, time on task, and Net Promoter Score (NPS).

part of Breakthrough’s success during the COVID-19 closure was the ability to build on existing relationships among school personnel, scholars, and their families. They not only kept in touch, they drew closer as a community.”

Summary

Breakthrough leaders and staff demonstrated the ability to pivot rapidly during the pandemic to meet the needs of scholars and families. They implemented various strategies to maintain an effective learning environment, and addressed scholar social-emotional needs through meals, resources, and safe physical spaces. The following summarizes the lessons learned from teaching and learning during the pandemic and factors that contributed to retaining more students and attracting new scholars and families.

- **Actively Communicating with Families.** Staff acted proactively by approaching families via phone calls, text messages, emails, and virtual home visits. By assessing family needs, staff were able to provide resources more effectively. Staff recognized the importance of maintaining close and consistent communication with families to ensure their well-being and understand their challenges during the pandemic.
- **Tenacious and Committed Scholars and Families.** Scholars and families demonstrated tenacity and commitment to learning and staying in school. Families ensured their scholars showed up for class and were present and engaged in the learning experience.
- **Reinforcing and Establishing Trusting Relationships with Scholars and Families.** An unexpected outcome of the pandemic was that it brought Breakthrough staff and teachers closer to families. Families knew they could count on Breakthrough to listen to their concerns, including insecurity about food and assistance with technology. Staff being

available for families, even during evening and weekend hours, reinforced families' trust and commitment. Staff commitment to their scholars and families was evidenced in reorganizing priorities and practices to meet the needs of families as rapidly as possible.

- **Collaborating with Partners.** An important factor in Breakthrough's accomplishments during the pandemic was its existing relationships with numerous organizations and individuals throughout the Cleveland area, as well as its willingness to establish new partners. At the onset of the pandemic, Breakthrough raised approximately \$1.2 million in just under three weeks, securing resources that enabled them to better serve families and keep scholars safe and engaged in learning.
- **Advocating for Families on the Other Side of the Digital Divide.** When leaders learned that local internet service was not accessible, and in some cases, denied to the most economically challenged families in Cleveland, Breakthrough initiated meetings with organizations to address the digital divide.
- **Reorganizing Resources.** The changes happening in the world meant that teaching and learning had to change. Breakthrough reorganized funds and staff to provide better services to scholars and families. For example, more funds were allocated to technology and partnerships to implement the ILCs at each campus.
- **Staff Openness to Growth.** Staff showed their commitment to scholars and families by their openness to growing their knowledge and skills in virtual learning. Staff requested more opportunities for professional growth in virtual teaching and learning, which enabled them to better reach and continue educating their scholars.