Supporting Education in D.C. and Chicago During COVID-19
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Turning The Page

Duke UNIVERSITY — **DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN** *Scholars Program*

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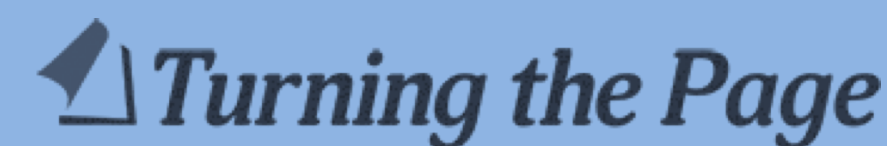
Purpose

The summer of 2020 consistently proves itself unconventional as the novel Coronavirus brings the social, economic, and political framework of the United States into question for politicians, academics, and citizens alike. Our socially-distanced "new normal" has transformed the ways we communicate in life and in work, and my public policy internship was no different – thanks to broadband internet and Sprint LTE, I was able to work in Chicago and D.C. from my residence in Durham. The workplace for Turning The Page, a non-profit organization focused on achieving educational equity through family engagement/network building to promote literacy within Black and low-income urban elementary schools, was transformed in a matter of days, moving out of classrooms, community spaces, and book stores and into the digital realm with platforms like Slack, Zoom, Classroom Dojo, and Facebook. With the shift in communication capabilities came a fundamental shift in the way TTP provided programming and resources to its families, a transition that preceded the COVID response of even TTP's partner schools and school districts. My project work centered around policy research in D.C.'s wards 7 and 8 and Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood, as Turning The Page works with eight partner schools in those areas, with an added national policy emphasis to support the organization's ongoing effort to expand the reach of their resources to low-income families nationwide. My research on technological inequities and the work to create a facilitation guide for parents to teach parents …. , and though my core public policy coursework prepared me to approach my internship work with an informed and intentional understanding of position and privilege, placing emphasis on the importance of real lived experience, it was not until the murder of George Floyd reignited the Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality that I understood firsthand the inextricability of the improvement of education policy and the pursuit of racial equity.

Objectives

During my internship I had the opportunity to work on projects for both the development and programming teams. Given the virtual structure of all work as a result of COVID-19, I worked with TTP to create innovative ways to directly support parents in D.C. and Chicago, as well as the greater U.S. public school system, by providing resources and consistent information to parents as they navigate this unprecedented time. This experience gave me the opportunity to learn more about the real-life experiences of urban public school students and families, an integral component of understanding the role of policy in shaping outcomes for marginalized and low-income communities. My day began with daily research on COVID-19 policies and education updates throughout the DC and Chicago areas in an effort to gain a better understanding of the way evidence-based policy can affect real change for individuals and communities, making note of food and tangible resource opportunities I came across as the pandemic closed schools. With the inescapable emotional impact of police brutality alongside the rise of the BLM protests and the institution of citywide curfews, our families' lives were impacted in ways that forced a shift in TTP's function. In Public Policy 301 with Dr. Sally Nuamah, we learned about the various political avenues through which social and economic change can be affected, like community organizing and collective resistance, both of which were exhibited in D.C. and in Chicago and thus called for organized support from organizations like TTP.

Methods

Through an online educational platform called Classroom Dojo, Turning The Page was able to pivot the frequency and content of resources distributed to parents to better support the moment's needs – pandemic and protest. With the closure of schools comes a number of subsequent implications for communities already lacking in resources as a result of systemic and structural disadvantage, like lack of access to food and broadband internet, so the response from Turning the Page necessitated a shift toward resources offering community food and goods, and sometimes even protest opportunities. Turning The Page oriented its work toward the needs of families before schools were even able to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic – this was possible through the intentionally personal relationship TTP fosters among its staff and parents, placing an emphasis on lived experience, and which reflects the (time-costly) influence of stakeholders with varying interests, forms of capital, and relative positions of privilege and power in the implementation of community assistance.

Partner Schools

Turning The Page works with families across eight partner schools in D.C. and Chicago.

An estimated 9.7 million US K-12 students do not have internet access at home – roughly 15%

Chicago Student Demographics
Chicago Public Schools: 355,156 students total (2019)
- 76.4% of CPS students are economically disadvantaged, according to CPS
- North Lawndale racial and ethnic distribution: 87% Black non-Hispanic, 8.7% Hispanic or Latino, 2.7% White non-Hispanic, 1.6% all other categories

Partner Schools' student racial/ethnic and socioeconomic distributions:

Kellman ES:	Legacy CS:	Sumner ES:	Turner ES:
98.8% Black	96.7% Black	98.1% Black	99.5% Black
0.8% Hispanic/Latino	3% Hispanic/Latino	1.2% Hispanic/Latino	0.5% Hispanic/Latino
0.4% Other	0.2% White	0.4% White	
		0.4% Other	
97.6% Low income	91.7% Low Income	91.4% Low Income	74% Low Income

Chicago Student Technological Access
State of Illinois – 20% of K-12 students lack internet access
- Cook County – estimated 111,027 K-12 students of 317,392 total lack internet access at home, or roughly 35%
- Approximately 3,550 or 37% of students in the North Lawndale neighborhood are without internet access based on US Census data (2020). Partner school breakdown (students lacking internet access of total student population):

Kellman – 121 of 347   Legacy – 162 of 464   Sumner – 92 of 263   Webster – 106 of 304

Before remote learning started, CPS estimated that about 115,000 students, or nearly a third of the total student body (including charter schools), needed a laptop or tablet in order to participate in learning from home.

D.C. Student Demographics
DC Public Schools: approx. 48,000 students total
- Approx. 77-78% f DCPS students are economically disadvantaged
- DC student racial and ethnic distribution: 60% Black, 20% Hispanic, 15% White, 5% all other categories

Partner Schools' student racial/ethic and socioeconomic distributions:

King ES:	Plummer ES:	Smothers ES:	Turner ES:
99% Black	88% Black	90% Black	97% Black
1% Hispanic/Latino	12% Hispanic/Latino	9% Hispanic/Latino	2% Hispanic/Latino
		1% Asian	1% Multiple Races

100% of students at our DC Partner Schools are **economically disadvantaged**

In D.C., just 27% of students attended their in-boundary traditional public school in 2016-17. This permits D.C.'s schools to be more integrated than their neighborhoods in theory.
- Percent in-boundary students at our partner schools: 40% at King, 62% at Plummer, 56% at Smothers, 67% at Turner

D.C. Student Technological Access
DCPS estimates that about 30% of its 52,000 students lack Internet access or computers at home.
- DC – estimated 12,209 of 47,204 students, or roughly 26% of students, are without internet access. Partner school breakdown (students lacking internet access of total student population):

King – 131 of 374   Plummer – 137 of 391   Smothers – 89 of 253   Turner – 169 of 484

As of May 21st in D.C., the Washington Teachers' Union found that **57%** of the 2,000 teachers surveyed (approx. half of the DC teaching workforce) **said less than half of their students participate** in remote learning activities.

Conclusion

Cities across the US felt the effects of the international pandemic as disparities in access to educational resources among school districts and schools only widened with the implementation of social distancing measures, leaving thousands of students across the nation without access to technology to complete their schoolwork – a direct result of the existence of a market for education. In Public Policy 303 with Dr. Lisa Gennetian, I was taught that parents' investment in education can be graphed with an overly-simplified supply and demand curve, representing their willingness to invest additional money in educational goods/quality as a portion of their total income, with zero additional investment representing participation in public school. The use of economic modeling to represent parents' investment in the education market is fundamentally misconceiving, as the technological divide highlights a deeper structural issue of consistent access to quality education. When select public schools in wealthier areas have the ability to provide technology to every student while nearly one-third of both Chicago and DC's student populations lack access to the internet, the issue parents face cannot be neatly drawn using economic tools for individual consumption. My research on the technological divide reinforced theories of a "COVID slide," similar to the concept of summer slide for elementary students, that will disproportionately affect students of color and students in low income communities in the coming school years. The use of economic modeling undermines the existence of structural and institutional factors that influence a family's ability to invest in education, and concurrently works to justify the market structure of the American education system – a system that systematically disadvantages students of color and contributes to differences in academic investment, which in turn impacts students' perceptions of opportunity.

I had an impactful internship experience that in some ways built upon my public policy knowledge, but in others actually refuted the concepts I had learned. In retrospect, one of the most important parts of my internship was my participation in the Black Lives Matter movement in Raleigh and Durham in the evenings, but what I gleaned from the summer in whole was a greater sense of the interconnectedness of the fight for racial justice with the improvement of education policy. Education provides students the most prominent opportunity for upward mobility in society today, and my internship gave me the opportunity to see how centering lived experience can result in positive outcomes in the direction of educational equity – starting within the family. Learning within the school is supplemented by parent's involvement in their child's education now more than ever before, particularly as the classroom has quite literally moved to the family room during school closures in the COVID era. This experience aimed to work closely with low-income communities in a way that seeks to recognize inequities that currently exist in the public education system and then act to provide resources directly to families where those gaps really exist. Turning The Page believes in the importance of family engagement in creating a more equitable education system for all students, not unlike the centering of lived experience that the public policy core courses instill in students.

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