

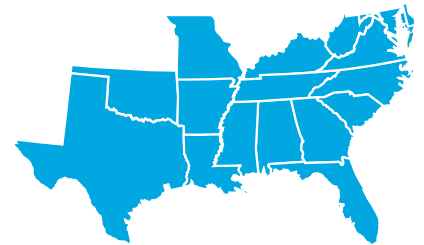
DISTANCE LEARNING EQUITY DASHBOARD

Five Ways to Support Teachers as Schools Reopen



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THE SCHOOL REOPENING DEBATE has reached an inflection point as districts weigh both the safety and learning implications of returning to in-person education this fall. Challenges with transitioning to distance learning during the spring made it clear that teachers, parents and students needed more and different resources to make supportive, developmentally-appropriate distance learning accessible for



all students during this crisis. Much of the debate has been focused on whether learning should take place at home or in school, with less of a focus on what is needed to support teaching and learning, especially in schools that have longstanding inequities.



The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) first sought to understand how districts were meeting the needs of their most vulnerable students and published the issue brief, [Distance Learning During COVID-19: 7 Equity Considerations for Schools and Districts](#). We then looked at 48 districts across 20 states and developed the [Distance Learning Equity Dashboard \(DLED\)](#) to track, across 20 indicators, how districts were providing academic, social-emotional and other



wraparound support to students, as well as how they were supporting teachers and parents in navigating the transition to distance learning. The districts reflect the

demographics of southern school districts. Nearly 44 percent of the students enrolled in the chosen districts are Black, while 21 percent are Hispanic or Latinx and 3 percent are Asian. In comparison, students in the South's public schools are nearly 23 percent Black, 27 percent Hispanic or Latinx, and 4 percent Asian. On average, 67 percent of students in the reviewed districts receive Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL), compared with 57.1 percent of public school students in the South. 13 percent of students in these districts have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and 10 percent are English Language Learners (ELLs).

We found that districts were taking thoughtful steps toward expanding distance learning supports; however, reopening plans varied in their attention to teachers' needs.

In the process of developing the DLED and reviewing state and district reopening plans, we found that districts were taking thoughtful steps towards expanding internet and WiFi access, making technology a priority, providing social and emotional learning and mental health support for students, and addressing summer learning loss. However, reopening plans varied in their attention to teachers' needs. A vast and varied body of research has shown that teacher quality is a critical determinant of student achievement.

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Research has also shown that teachers become more effective when they have collegial, supportive work environments with opportunities for peer collaboration, professional learning, and meaningful coaching and mentorship. These factors also play a role in teachers' decisions to stay in or leave the profession.

We sought to understand the extent to which reopening plans addressed these factors and identified five key ways schools and districts can support teachers as they head into the next school year. This brief provides recommendations for state and local policymakers and administrators to consider to help teachers show up this school year as the healthy, skilled, well-resourced professionals students need in this critical moment.

other factors, is associated with higher rates of teacher turnover in schools. A 2018 Gallup poll found that only 31 percent of K-12 teachers believed their input mattered when important decisions were being made at the school level.



Only half of southern States intentionally incorporated teacher input into their plans.

Given the importance of teacher input on the local level, we sought to understand whether there were opportunities for teacher input at the state and district levels. A review of reopening plans revealed that only half of southern states intentionally incorporated teacher input in their plans. In Florida, for example, Governor Ron DeSantis and Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran are pushing schools to reopen for in-person instruction in the fall, despite objections from educators in the state and the state's

1 ENGAGE TEACHERS IN REOPENING DECISIONS

Teachers are on the frontline and are closest to understanding students' learning needs and their own instructional needs. Research has shown that limited teacher input in decision-making, among

continued struggles with rapidly rising COVID-19 infections. Teachers in Orange County Schools, Florida's fourth-largest school district, are compelling the district to push back its reopening date and offer alternatives rooted in distance learning. In Miami-Dade County Schools, Florida's largest school district, the United Teachers of Dade County praised Superintendent Alberto Carvalho's decision to halt the district's planned reopening until COVID-19 cases in the county dramatically decreased.

In the South's two largest states, Texas and Florida, the state chapters of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are willing to organize strikes if their states require teachers to go back to school without proper precautions for preventing



the transmission of COVID-19. Recent guidance and a directive from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis requiring schools

to reopen for in-person instruction in the fall have made teacher strikes in Texas and Florida more likely.

Some states included teachers, teacher union representatives, and other school-based stakeholders in their school reopening working groups to ensure input from them on the safest way to reopen schools.

Only six southern states – Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia – explicitly mention either surveying teachers or collecting teacher input early in the process of developing their reopening plans. Of those states, only Georgia and South Carolina discuss specifically surveying teachers to discern and identify protocols for those at risk for developing serious complications from COVID-19. Other states, such as Delaware, Maryland, Tennessee, and Virginia, included teachers, teacher union representatives, and other school-based stakeholders in their school reopening working groups to ensure input from them on the safest way to reopen schools. Oklahoma's [state reopening plan](#) is one of the most robust versions of the multi-stakeholder engagement model, calling for district reopening leadership teams throughout the state that give teachers the opportunity to play a leadership role in designing their district's reopening plan. Florida's [plan](#), on the

other hand, mentions surveying teachers to ascertain what will help them teach successfully in the coming school year, but not to identify any concerns they may have about reopening schools.

State plans from [South Carolina](#) and [Tennessee](#) include directives on conducting staff needs assessments to better understand the health conditions of teachers, their family members,



and individuals they are caring for at home, and teachers' preferences for reopening, among other important topics. South Carolina's reopening plan also acknowledges teachers' social and emotional needs, a topic that only 27 of 48 districts addressed in SEF's analysis of district reopening plans. On the district level, encouragingly, a number of southern school districts have provided teachers with the opportunity to voice their preferences for reopening.

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) in Virginia, for example, issued an online survey that offered teachers two options for resuming instruction in the fall: entirely remote instruction or a hybrid approach that would involve teachers and students physically attending school two days per week. The school district has also [articulated](#) that they will make accommodations for staff members who would face particular challenges during an in-person reopening strategy, such as

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) in Virginia, for example, issued an online survey that offered teachers two options for resuming instruction: remote or hybrid. They also made accommodations for staff members who would face particular challenges.

concerns about childcare, high risk for developing serious complications from COVID-19, and the possibility of exposing a loved one in the high risk category.

The School District of Palm Beach County in Florida administered a detailed, multi-question [survey](#) to teachers and support staff to ascertain their preferences for reopening in the fall, their main concerns surrounding schools reopening, the factors influencing their reopening preferences,

and the type of access they have at home to devices, WiFi, and remote instructional tools. Overall, in Palm Beach County, most teachers and staff members showed more support for a blended or entirely remote reopening, with the exception of bus drivers and cafeteria workers, who showed more support for an in-person reopening. Recognizing that teacher perspectives can vary across and within grade levels, Hamilton County Schools in Tennessee included elementary, middle and high school teachers on their [reopening task force](#).

Overall, our review of southern states' reopening plans has shown that a small group of southern states mentioned the possibility of proactively listening to teachers' concerns through administration of a survey, and some districts are making an effort to engage teachers' voices at various stages of the planning process.

2 REEVALUATE AND DEVELOP MORE SUPPORTIVE SICK LEAVE POLICIES

A large portion of our nation's teacher workforce is susceptible to contracting and suffering from COVID-19, particularly if schools move forward with in-person instruction without the resources to reopen safely. Data from the U.S. Department of Education show that 28 percent of public school teachers in the

United States are over the age of 50, and over 7 percent are over the age of 60. Due to their age, individuals in both groups, particularly the latter, are at higher risk of developing complications from COVID-19 that would prevent them from


Twenty-eight percent of public school teachers are over the age of 50, and over 7 percent are over the age of 60—with greater health risks.



teaching. In addition, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that 24 percent, or nearly 1.5 million teachers, are in the high risk category for developing a serious illness from a COVID-19 infection stemming from a combination of risk factors, including having underlying health

Black and Latinx people throughout the southern states have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

conditions and being over the age of 65. National data on the impact of COVID-19 thus far have also shown that Black and Latinx people throughout the southern states have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. In light of these infection rates and trends, Black and Latinx teachers face a higher likelihood of missing work due to contracting COVID-19 themselves or having a family member they care for contract COVID-19, putting them at a higher risk for losing pay during an extended absence where equitable sick leave policies are not in place.



These particular concerns among the teacher workforce have become evident in survey results from teachers in a number of southern states. In South Carolina, a survey from teacher advocacy organization SC for Ed captured responses from over 7,600 teachers, or 15 percent of the state's teacher workforce, regarding their vulnerability to serious infection resulting from COVID-19 based on underlying health

conditions. Results from the survey reveal that 64 percent of responding teachers in South Carolina are in either the higher risk or possible higher risk categories for complications stemming from COVID-19.

Current sick leave policies in the southern states



Each southern state has a codified sick leave policy for teachers and support staff that dictates the number of days each year a school district employee can be absent from school while retaining full pay. Sick leave policies in the South vary by state, but all states have some type of base allocation of sick leave days and a set number of days a teacher can accrue during each month of employment. In [Texas](#), the amount of sick days a teacher has the ability to accrue per month is based on their period of employment;

based on length of service, employees receive between 8 and 21 hours per month, and can accrue between 12 and 31.5 days per year. [Missouri](#) and [Maryland](#) also calculate accrual of sick leave for teachers by the hour, allotting 10 hours of additional leave per month

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of employment and 4.615 hours per pay period, respectively. In [Alabama](#), [Arkansas](#), [Florida](#), [North Carolina](#), and [Tennessee](#), teachers receive one additional day of paid sick leave per month of employment, while other states such as [Georgia](#) and [West Virginia](#) provide 1.25 and 1.5 days, respectively. In our review of states' paid sick leave policies for teachers, we found that a common baseline amount of sick days in a school year was 10 days, which is below the amount required for a safe isolation period following exposure to COVID-19. Florida's [policy](#) provides only four paid sick days at the beginning of each new contract year, followed by one additional day per month thereafter. We were encouraged to see that policies surrounding accrual of paid sick leave are fairly generous in most southern states; out of the states where we were able

to find this information, only [Arkansas](#), [Delaware](#), and [Oklahoma](#) have a cap on the amount of paid sick leave a teacher can accrue. Arkansas and Delaware allow for the accrual of 90 paid sick days total, while Oklahoma allows for 60.

Insufficient paid sick leave can pose a significant problem for new teachers, as most new teachers will not have enough paid sick days accrued to take paid time off from work in the event of illness. Teachers may rely on the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) when they must miss days beyond their allotted sick leave; however, FMLA is unpaid. The [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#) (FFCRA)



includes provisions for addressing the lack of pay that teachers would experience if forced to be away from the

classroom for a prolonged period. These provisions include providing employees who contract COVID-19 or display symptoms with up to two weeks of additional paid sick leave at their regular rate of pay, and providing employees who miss work due to caring for a family member who is infected with or affected by COVID-19 with up to two weeks of additional paid sick leave at two-thirds

Gallup Poll found that K-12 teachers are more concerned than other U.S. workers about workplace COVID-19 exposure and that they increasingly prefer remote work due to concerns about the virus. A May USA Today/Ipsos poll shows that 20 percent, or one-fifth, of teachers surveyed will not return to work if schools are forced to reopen for in-person instruction this fall. In the same poll, 40 percent



Teachers are acutely aware that they are facing tremendous health risks in returning to in-person teaching. A recent Gallup Poll found that K-12 teachers are more concerned than other U.S. workers about workplace COVID-19 exposure.

of their regular rate of pay. [Guidance](#) for teachers from the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) encourages teachers to advocate for themselves by utilizing Expanded FMLA under the FFCRA, which provides teachers with two-thirds of their regular pay during FMLA for up to 10 weeks.

Teachers are acutely aware that they are facing tremendous health risks if they return to in-person teaching. A recent

of teachers said that they are opposed to returning to the classroom before a COVID-19 vaccine is available. Although the feasibility of such a prolonged period of distance learning is still uncertain, these results underscore the grave concern that many teachers have for the health and safety of themselves, their family members, and their students. A number of state reopening plans we reviewed contain promising sick leave policies that could support teachers

during this time. Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia all call for increased flexibility in their sick leave policies to allow for possible increased teacher absences due to COVID-19. Georgia recommends an additional Employee Assistance Program to address the needs of all staff members, while Kentucky recommends a COVID-19-related protocol

the classroom, and this moment may exacerbate existing challenges with the substitute teaching workforce. A State-by-State Summary on the status of substitute teachers from the National Education Association (NEA) shows that Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Maryland are all facing a shortage of substitute teachers. Some states, such as Tennessee, acknowledge in

The inevitable need for sick leave also raises the issue of how quality instruction will continue when teachers must leave the classroom, and this moment may exacerbate existing challenges with the substitute teaching workforce.



for staff members that, at minimum, must address leave options. [Oklahoma's plan](#) is especially robust and provides multiple options for districts, all of which are rooted in providing employees with the flexibility they need to recover from COVID-19 exposure and illness, and its plan recommends that districts explicitly allow employees to receive pay and benefits during a potential prolonged period of absence. The inevitable need for sick leave also raises the issue of how quality instruction will continue when teachers must leave

their reopening plans the fact that more substitute teachers will be needed, but do not articulate a plan for bringing more substitute teachers into classrooms when full-time teachers are on sick leave or extended leave. A strategy to increase substitute teacher availability, coupled with more generous sick leave policies for teachers and strategies to retain teachers currently in the workforce, may help districts overcome workforce shortages as schools reopen in the fall.

3

ANTICIPATE TEACHER SHORTAGES AND STRENGTHEN THE EDUCATOR PIPELINE

If the impact of this crisis is anything like what followed the Great Recession, states and districts will face tough decisions regarding teacher shortages and reductions in force. Prior to COVID-19, projections from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) have shown a downward trajectory in the supply of teachers in the workforce with the gap between the supply and demand becoming greater over time. These shortages can be magnified for school districts in need of teachers with specific certifications by subject or special population.

EPI's 2018 projections estimated a 100,000 shortfall in the supply of teachers for 2020 which will grow to 200,000 by 2025. These projections are independent of COVID-19, which may widen the gap between the supply and demand of teachers. Shortages have resulted in larger class sizes and placed a greater burden on the current classroom teachers. The Learning Policy Institute has projected that state budget shortfalls will have a negative impact on the availability of teachers. With an estimated 15 percent budget reduction across states, the United States can expect to see an 8.4 percent reduction in the teaching workforce. Assuming a 15 percent budget reduction, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Texas would face some of the largest

numbers of teaching workforce reductions. Teachers may also voluntarily choose not to return to work in the fall to provide in-person instruction due to safety and health concerns.

In light of these anticipated shortages, states and districts should continue developing promising programs for strengthening the educator pipeline. Any reductions in the teaching workforce should be mindful not to disproportionately remove teachers

Students, regardless of race or ethnicity, benefit from the presence of teachers of color.

of color from the classroom as studies show that all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, benefit from the presence of teachers of color. Grown Your Own (GYO) programs, which recruit, develop and retain teachers from the local community, have helped schools address the shortfall in available teachers and the need for increased teacher diversity. These programs are aimed at providing students and staff within the districts a pathway to becoming a classroom teacher. When schools grow their workforce from within the district, students have the benefit of teachers who understand their communities, needs and experiences.

In South Carolina, the [Teacher Cadets](#) is a state-wide program aimed at attracting high school students to teaching through

postsecondary education programs. High school students in the program participate in dual credit courses that count for high school and college credits. The [Houston Independent School District](#) (HISD) has created the Teach Forward Houston program in partnership with the University of Houston. Students are eligible to receive awards to receive their bachelor's degree in education in exchange for committing to teaching within HISD for 4 years. HISD has also partnered with the [University of St. Thomas](#) to increase the number of bilingual teachers' aids in the classroom.

Some states have leveraged funding under Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to support local initiatives for increasing the teacher workforce and diversity. For example, the [Tennessee Department of Education](#) utilized Title II, Part A funds to support teacher diversity by awarding grants to local school districts. [Mississippi](#) implemented a Grow-Your-Own Teacher Initiative, and, in 2019, the state's GYO Teacher Task Force [report](#) included recommendations to strengthen the pipeline into the teaching workforce by targeting middle and high school students, paraprofessionals and other classified staff, and community colleges and teacher preparation providers.

4

PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCES TO HELP TEACHERS ADJUST TO DISTANCE LEARNING

While many teachers struggled with the transition to distance learning, those with more experience, qualifications, and knowledge about teaching in unconventional ways may have been able to transition to distance learning more easily. Research has shown that teachers' qualifications, knowledge and skills, and instructional practices are the single most important

Teachers' qualifications, knowledge and skills, and instructional practices are the single most important determinant for student learning. Yet, Black students and other students of color are four times more likely to be taught by uncertified or inexperienced teachers than their White peers.

determinant for student learning. Yet, Black students and other students of color are four times more likely to be taught by an uncertified or inexperienced teacher than their White peers. This inequity is

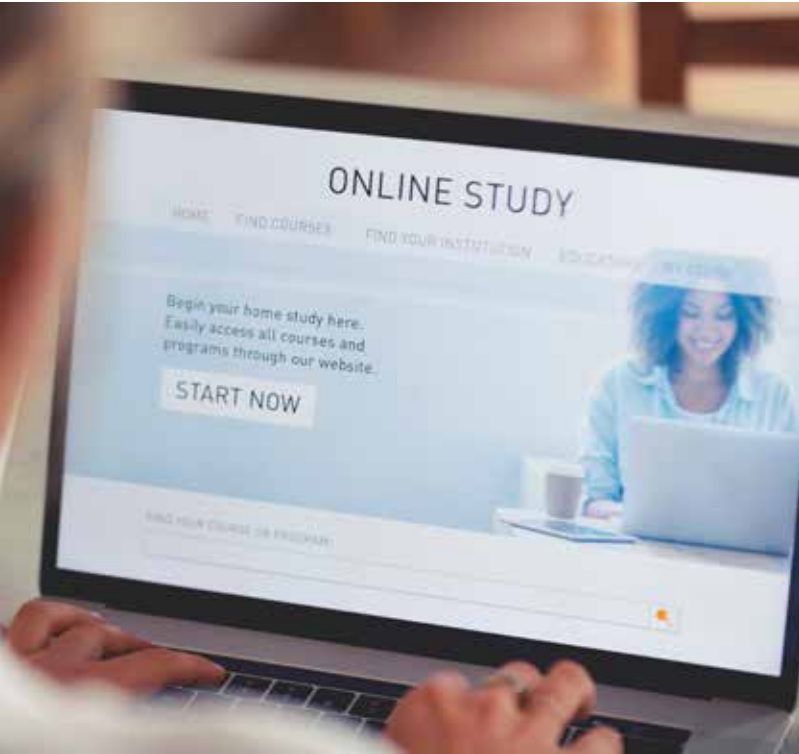
compounded in this particular moment as Black and Latinx students and students from low-income backgrounds face additional barriers to high-quality distance learning with data revealing that nearly 20 percent of Black children ages 3-18 and 21 percent of families earning less than \$40,000 per year have no access to the internet at home.

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Teaching remotely requires skills and practice to keep students engaged and learning while providing personalized instruction and support. Even experienced teachers may not have engaged in teacher preparation programs that provided the mix of training in teaching, facilitation and instructional design that virtual learning requires. Districts and schools should assess the extent to which their teachers and home educators are informed of remote learning best practices and provide supportive professional development. Professional development should include mentoring and coaching and train teachers to create educational experiences that include collaborative project work, real-world problem solving, and supportive and safe relationships with adults and peers.

Districts are providing professional development in a number of creative ways. For example, SCETV, South Carolina’s public

broadcasting and education network, is providing [free virtual professional development sessions](#) to educators on home learning and technology best practices. [Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida](#) is providing professional development webinars on distance learning to better support teachers. Webinar topics include teacher training for online platforms, how to leverage technology to



monitor student learning, how to create dynamic online videos, how to support students’ transition to online learning, and how to provide students with differentiated assignments based on their needs.

Additionally, some districts are providing coaching and curricular support. Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida’s

Division of Academics has developed new [Instructional Continuity Pacing Guides \(ICPGs\)](#) to help teachers develop distance learning lessons and assignments for students across all grade levels. The ICPGs include general recommendations for how much time a student should spend (weekly or daily) engaging with each subject based on the age and grade level of the student. [Wake County Public School System](#) in North Carolina has school-based Digital Learning Coordinators (DLCs) to help teachers understand technology- and learning-related issues during the period of

broadband access is unavailable, and other teachers may not be able to afford the costs of WiFi with enough bandwidth to deliver uninterrupted online instruction. Districts are addressing these needs by covering some of teachers' costs. For



Districts should also keep in mind that some teachers are experiencing difficulty accessing reliable WiFi and technology to deliver high-quality distance instruction.

distance learning. Additionally, the district has a professional learning website that features comprehensive professional learning opportunities for all staff.

Districts should also keep in mind that some teachers are experiencing difficulty accessing reliable WiFi and technology to deliver high-quality distance instruction. Some teachers live in rural areas where



example, the superintendent of [Seguin Independent School District in Texas](#) announced the district would provide teachers with a stipend for home internet service and cell phone service at \$50 a month for both April and May. Dorchester County Schools in Maryland provided all teachers with \$37 monthly stipend for internet and cellphone service, and Lee County Public Schools in Florida provided 300 WiFi hotspots for teachers and instructional staff in need.

5 SUPPORT TEACHERS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

Just as students may be dealing with feelings of isolation, increased responsibility of caring for family members, changes in family income, death, and other issues brought on by the pandemic, schools and districts should also consider ways to support the social and emotional well-being of teachers, administrators and staff during this time. Teachers have reported that they are also experiencing extreme amounts of stress due to the abrupt transition to distance learning, the possibility of in-person learning, and uncertainty about what will happen in the upcoming school

general population. The general stresses surrounding COVID-19 coupled with the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on communities of color can be an immense emotional and mental burden for teachers of color, and Black teachers are managing the additional burden of the heightened attention to and demands for racial justice.

While there is rightfully much attention to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and physical health needs of students and teachers, schools and districts should also consider ways to provide the emotional and mental support teachers will need to effectively teach their students. [Atlanta Public Schools \(APS\)](#) in Georgia has provided six weeks of social emotional learning lessons to each grade band including

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year. This may be magnified for teachers who have experienced the trauma of losing a loved one due to COVID-19. The overall heightened anxiety associated with COVID-19, social distancing, and, for some, feelings of isolation have all had an impact on teachers' mental and emotional health, as they have on the

lessons for teachers and leaders to help students process their emotions during this time. APS is also providing adult care through virtual Wellness Wednesdays and SELf-care Fridays with partners providing yoga lessons, mindfulness and other experiences to support teachers. [Charlottesville City Schools](#) in Virginia has

a variety of programs and opportunities to support teachers. The District has partnered with the University of Virginia to provide their Employee Assistance Program which gives teachers access to free and confidential counseling. In addition to providing access to counseling services, the District has self-care training such mindfulness workshops and yoga classes.

The Southern Education Foundation continues to follow the districts' needs and provide relevant resources to administrators and policymakers as they make choices about how to best serve their students during this crisis. We hope this brief contributes to conversations on what policies, practices and resources are needed as districts and schools seek to resume teaching and learning while keeping students, teachers, staff, and their families safe. If you have any questions about our review of district plans or suggestions for additional examples we should share, please contact Titilayo Tinubu Ali, SEF Director of Research and Policy, at tali@southerneducation.org.

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VIEW THE
DASHBOARD

This Dashboard is a living resource and will be updated continuously as new information becomes available. We hope you find it useful.

ENDNOTES

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