

United States: George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA)

Type of intervention: non-governmental

Website: <https://www.phalenacademies.org/GVPLA>

General description

The George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies (“PLA”) is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2013. PLA started as a network of charter schools, which were founded from scratch by the organization, but evolved to include also public schools in a turnaround model. In its short 7-year history as an organization, PLA has transformed seven schools rated as “failing” by local accountability standards into “excellent” schools; it has grown to 22 schools across five diverse states serving nearly 10 000 children; and is the fastest growing Black-led school turnaround network. PLA serves in Indiana, Michigan, Florida, and Ohio. Ninety-three percent (93%) of our students (called “scholars”) are Black or Latino, and 89% of them are living in poverty. More information on PLA is available as an Annex.

The school leadership team followed the guidance from scientists carefully as a way to anticipate future scenarios. They concluded from learning about the various models predicting the evolution of the Pandemic that it would be highly likely that schools would be closed for the remainder of the school year, the summer months, and possibly would not open next fall. This early recognition of the severity of the crisis enabled them to lean wholeheartedly into a plan that would maximize learning opportunities for children through alternative modalities of delivery.

The strategy for educational continuity during the period of physical distancing rests on four pillars: academic learning, nutrition, emotional support, and staff’s needs for support.

1. *Nutrition.* 93% of the PLA sites had up and running “grab and go” locations for families to get food within the first week of schools shutting down.
2. *Emotional support.* Each school in the network developed a plan to reach out to every student so they remained connected to their teachers – including the issue that few of the 10 000 students. Teachers conducted virtual pizza parties, virtual “dance offs” and have simply made touch points with each scholar and family through bi-weekly one-on-one calls, among other initiatives.
3. *Academic learning.* PLA developed a three-part plan to ensure that students continued to have high level, quality touch points with the content that they were learning before the crisis. It was rolled out in phases, providing time to secure

necessary infrastructure and to gain knowledge of the duration of period of mandated distancing.

- Phase I: All scholars were distributed 3-4-week worth of paper-based, standards-aligned learning materials packets with the same “grab and go” method as for nutrition. Staff made home visits to families for the few remaining students.
 - Phase II: Scholars have access to PLA’s newly developed eLearning website. As scholars worked through Phase I, PLA leadership team worked vigorously to ideate, create and launch an e-learning website that features over 400 short video lessons. Each video is accompanied with worksheets that students can download and work through while watching the videos. The e-Learning site is created to serve all students from K-12th grade.
 - Phase III (within 2 months of school buildings closure): Scholars will be provided one-to-one devices with connectivity, and academic instruction will be provided virtually by their teachers. Students will participate real-time in virtual class lessons, they will access small group instruction and will submit assignments and receive feedback and grades virtually. Devices will be procured through the following: reallocation of Title I funds (a grant from the federal government to schools serving students from low income families); financial donations from foundations, corporations and individuals; and donations of devices by corporate partners.
4. *Support to staff.* Staff were trained to teach online and were fully engaged in all the other aspects of the strategic plan. Staff participated in 10 hours of professional development to support the transition to eLearning. There will also be on-going training. All of the training is done virtually. PLA also has an on-line training platform called PLA University. Training models are available for staff to access at any time. A Help Desk was set up to help families and students use the technology and unburden staff on some aspects of the e-learning journey.

Main problems addressed

The PLA strategy had to address several types of problems given the circumstances of the communities serviced by PLA include:

- *Limited personal devices:* Most of children did not have access to devices that could help deliver e-learning (iPads or Chromebooks).
- *Limited connectivity:* Most families are not connected to the internet in their homes.
- *Difficult studying conditions:* Most scholars do not have “a quiet place” to go to focus during eLearning instruction.
- *Limited teacher self-efficacy with online teaching:* Most teachers were not comfortable with delivering virtual instruction.
- *Unfamiliarity with online teaching features:* There was initially little capacity to provide wrap around support for all of the added technological features that are implemented.
- *Family grievance support:* Black and low-income communities are experiencing a disproportionate death toll in the midst of the covid crisis in the United States, so that helping families who are grieving due to the loss of family members has also become a priority.

- *Parental stress:* Many of parents are dealing with increased stress – many have lost their job early on in the crisis and now thrust into the world of providing instructional support to their child. Many are uncomfortable in their role in a virtual learning environment.
- *Support for younger students:* Delivering eLearning to younger scholars (5- and 6-year-olds) is an added challenge especially as they typically do not have the support at home.
- *Measuring success:* Determining the right way to monitor progress and measure success in the new implemented model was a last challenge: what is the “right” and new measure of success?

Mobilising and developing resources

PLA had several existing resources to rely on to implement this alternative “continuity education” plan.

At the top of this list was a dedicated team that is deeply committed to caring for and supporting PLA children and families during the transition.

To ensure food security, PLA normally relies on a US federal nutrition program designed to serve the children PLA serves. This programme continued during the period of physical distancing and eased some restrictions, as a result of a government decision, that enabled PLA to care for families, not just the children who attended the school.

To provide socio emotional support to children and families, schools relied on the availability of mobile phones, which most students (of a certain age) in the schools have. Using this communication infrastructure, teachers were able to stay connected via phone, text and FaceTime. Teachers used google to call their students and maintain privacy on their personal phone numbers.

Fostering effective use of resources and learning

The very first step in the strategy of ensuring academic continuity was providing paper-based packets for our scholars. It was challenging, and the implementation worked perfectly, but while it is positive to have 3-4 week learning packets in the hands of children, paper-based packets are not instruction. Some children will not engage. Even those who will engage will do so without opportunities for correction and feedback, so they may complete the work but do all of it wrong. This first step was necessary to buy time to address the challenge while ensuring students would continue to have learning opportunities meanwhile.

PLA uses an ‘assets based’ approach to serving children, looking for strengths in students and their communities, rather than deficits. The same philosophy guided the development of the strategy for educational continuity.

Technology. While many PLA children initially had no access to iPads and Chromebooks, most have access to a smart phone. The eLearning platform was thus designed to work on any device and to be Mifi enabled. Within two weeks, the leadership team raised funds to purchase 32% of PLA technology needs, reallocated some of its funds towards technology. The fund was raised from dedicated PLA supporters and from key connections at some of the largest technology companies such as Microsoft. PLA negotiated with local internet providers so that eligible PLA families could access free services for 90 days – and worked with families who had a past balance, securing donations to help pay off past balances, and in some cases past due fees were waived.

Academic learning. [PLA's new eLearning site](#) includes 12-minute videos of excellent PLA teachers from around the network delivering instruction. Over 400 direct instruction videos were developed: 30 videos for

English Language Arts and 30 videos for maths for every grade. Older scholars also have access to virtual classes. The learning resources were all created in less than three weeks by PLA academic team and teachers.

Studying conditions. PLA provided headphones to all scholars to help them focus in on their lesson, whether it was difficult because they have multiple siblings that are now all in the home together and/or very little available quiet space dedicated to learning.

Student engagement through glamour and celebrity support. PLA engaged well-known stars and leaders, including Super Bowl Indianapolis Colt Marlin Jackson, Heisman Trophy winner Ricky Williams and Indianapolis Pacers basketball star Victor Oladipo. These celebrities and other leaders (i.e. Black and Latino judges, doctors, scientists, business leaders) are invited to deliver positive messages during homeroom, encouraging children to continue to work hard, expressing how proud they are of them, and encouraging them to focus on their education. This appears to be extremely motivating for the scholars.

Enrichment. The eLearning site also includes numerous enrichment opportunities, which is highly appreciated by scholars and families: art, physical education and virtual field trips. New fun enrichment clubs are being developed and offered daily.

Teacher training. A suite of training videos was developed for PLA teachers to access at any time, and PLA's Academic Team provided real-time "in person" virtual training sessions for all staff. PLA developed a "mentoring" program that supports peer-to-peer support in navigating this new delivery system. It has also purchased the Blackboard platform which is used in colleges and universities across the United States.

Help Desk. PLA has set up a 40-person trained Help Desk team to support students and parents experiencing challenges with eLearning. All have been trained and have access to step-by-step guides to support them in addressing parent concerns. This was done thanks to the full funding the schools continued to receive and the fact that some positions are no longer required when students do not come to school.

Paid teaching assistant role. The youngest scholars need the help of an adult to access and understand their assignments. To engage their parents, PLA offers a paid Virtual Teaching Assistant role to parents, allowing those who lost their job or are experiencing additional financial stress during the crisis to have some additional financial security while enabling them to focus on supporting their child.

Family grievance support. PLA has partnered with several churches, social work agencies, family services agencies and counsellors to ensure that they appropriately support children, families and staff.

Monitoring success

A question the PLA team reflected upon is: what is the "right" and new measure of success? Their answer was: "progress, not perfection" and "commitment to share challenges and setbacks honestly", so they can address and become stronger in their efforts to serve their scholars.

The first measure of success is the high percentage of families that have participated in the weekly "grab and go" meal program. Since its inception, over 93% of PLA families have utilised this service. PLA has thus provided opportunities for students to continue receiving nutritious meals.

A second measure of success is that PLA children and families feel loved and maintain a sense of connectedness to PLA, evidenced by the number of touchpoints that teachers record having had with each of them on a weekly basis: 83% of PLA scholars have spoken with their teachers at least twice a week, and 91% have connected with their teacher or administrator at least once a week.

Traffic to the new PLA eLearning platform has increased by 1000% from the first week to the second week and the percentage of student engagement has more than doubled. . Some of the ways engagement will

be measured include: daily logins, assignment completion rates, number of student questions, and content mastery.

Adaptability to new contexts

The essential elements of the strategy followed by PLA are transferable across certain contexts. They will work well in high-income countries for students from lower economic backgrounds and in low- and middle-income countries. They require a context where IT infrastructure and devices are affordable to most, if not lower income families. It will work best where teaching staff and leadership is extremely competent and dedicated in normal time, and willing to continue to fulfil its mission during the crisis.

Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Build on your existing values and mission and build your strategy and actions based on them.
2. Lead by example at all levels of staffing, with a highly involved and collaborative leadership that engages a team in a 'roll up your sleeves' attitude.
3. Design a strategic plan with a clear set of priorities and a sequence of several steps that allow flexibility to respond to additional information about the duration of the physical isolation.
4. Promote a mindset to think outside the box in looking for ways to build an alternative delivery chain to implement the priorities of the plan.
5. Have rapid communications across all stakeholders in the organisation to quickly obtain feedback and use it to adjust implementation.
6. Establish solid partnership with federal programs and local authorities to have the flexibility to create new mechanisms of delivery (for example, flexibility in the rules used to fund school meals, to include families, in addition to students).
7. Engage national and local celebrities to make learning more engaging for students and provide socio-emotional support.
8. Support families to help their children, including through monetary rewards.
9. Provide robust online training for the staff and set up a help desk for families and staff to support e-learning.

Author: Earl Martin Phalen, CEO and Founder of PLA and Fernando R. Reimers, Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Acknowledgements: