

100 LEADERSHIP when it matters most

The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards have recognized 100 innovative leaders making a difference in California. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges, many of these leaders have adapted their work and continued to innovate.

Leadership Award Recipients Pivot to Address Timely Challenges in Education

The five Leadership Award recipients featured in this brief worked in their community to support students and their families as they navigated the disruptions to school and learning. Their efforts included:

- Deploying technology to students and families where district resources lagged
- Establishing food pantries to meet the growing needs of students and families
- Creating a new community service corps to deploy youth's technology skills to meet real-time community needs
- Developing new digital resources for youth recreation and virtual student engagement
- Designing a resource guide for infusing play in school reopening plans
- Providing direct financial assistance to keep families in stable housing to allow for educational continuity

By highlighting the work and ideas of these leaders, the Irvine Foundation hopes to help policymakers and our peers in philanthropy advance effective solutions in education.



TONY BROWN 2017 AWARD RECIPIENT

HEART OF LOS ANGELES (HOLA) | LOS ANGELES COUNTY

HOLA is a place-based after-school organization providing a comprehensive array of academic, arts, and athletic programs to underserved youth in Los Angeles. As an education provider that continued operations during the pandemic, the nonprofit closed gaps in schools' response to COVID-19 by offering more than 150 weekly virtual classes in various course areas, maintaining a personal connection with students and parents, especially in the early days of the pandemic.

HOLA wasted no time reaching out to all its students to understand their greatest needs. It learned many did not have proper devices for remote curriculums and that nearly all of their households' breadwinners



had experienced some level of unemployment. HOLA immediately offered all available portable technology to students in need, filling the void while students waited to hear from their individual schools.

The organization also began weekly community food pantry services. Since the pandemic began, HOLA has provided more than \$200,000 for groceries and other basic needs like rental assistance. HOLA formed a family services department that reached 800 youth and more than 500 families, with an intimate focus on emotional and mental well-being. HOLA anticipates offering even more services to reconnect students with education as they return to in-person or hybrid schooling.

Lessons Learned

Programs that provided educational tools (computers and the internet) and basic needs (food and mental health services) in a centralized location softened the impact for students and families as they transitioned to distance learning and faced difficult events such as job loss, deaths in the family, and the absence of childcare.

Policy Consideration: Supporting community-based organizations that provide educational technology, supplies, or services alongside holistic family support services helps reduce barriers for families and creates more stability for students' learning environments.



JACOB MARTINEZ 2020 AWARD RECIPIENT

DIGITAL NEST | CENTRAL COAST

Digital NEST gives students access to free computers, software, equipment, and communal working space. The organization provides technology access, career exploration, and paid on-the-job training to teens and young adults from working-class, mostly immigrant families in Watsonville and Salinas. Students have access to free computers, software, equipment, and communal working space.

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Digital NEST hosted community meetings and learned that many students and families lacked proper devices and internet connectivity to participate in remote learning. Further, many families experienced unemployment and could not afford to purchase the necessary equipment and internet service. In response, Digital NEST quickly refocused its services to loan laptops to high school and community college students. The organization leveraged these youth's talent to design and launch a digital directory for hundreds of area small businesses, many of which previously lacked any kind of digital presence, allowing them to continue to sell goods and services online during the height of the pandemic.

This effort resulted in the creation of the NEST Corps program, modeled after successful community service programs like AmeriCorps and City Year. NEST Corps brought together staff and student volunteers to quickly address community needs - such as tutoring younger learners and creating a social media campaign to



fundraise for undocumented individuals. Additionally, Digital NEST provided one-time financial aid to community members experiencing hardships.

As a result of these collective efforts, students' households received technology tools that made digital learning possible during the pandemic. Digital NEST's youth-led services helped 190 local small businesses improve their visibility online and provided nearly \$200,000 in aid for groceries and other financial support. NEST Corps supports 50 student volunteers serving the community.

Lessons Learned

To progress academically, students need access to both technological devices and high-speed internet to support multiple devices. Additionally, if given the opportunity and support, young people have the power to be changemakers in their communities.

Policy Consideration: Investments in long-term, guaranteed access to the internet and technology devices, such as laptops, will ensure all students advance academically regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, primary language, or learning model (in-person, hybrid, or remote).



JILL CATES VIALET 2013 AWARD RECIPIENT

PLAYWORKS | STATEWIDE

Playworks helps kids stay active and build valuable social and emotional skills through fun and educational play. The organization responded to the COVID-19 crisis by expanding its digital platform and making free resources available to families, educators, and school staff in quarantine. It developed new services and digital resources for schools operating remotely and in a hybrid structure, such as Keep Playing, which gives school staff weekly resources to engage kids in remote or socially distanced games. Playworks also created the widely downloaded guide, Playworks Re-Opening Workbook, to help

schools create safe opportunities for play as they return to in-person learning.

Lessons Learned

Mental health challenges were amplified across all communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, in part due to the lack of social interaction. Restoring programs that provide social interaction and play as soon as the public health environment allows will lessen the burden on teachers and educational institutions and stabilize students and their families.

Policy Consideration: Planning for unstructured student playtime and access to the outdoors for play-based activities in school reopening plans can help rebuild students' social-emotional and mental health coping skills.



PETER WEBER

2016 AWARD RECIPIENT

CALIFORNIA BRIDGE ACADEMIES |
CENTRAL VALLEY

LUIS CARLOS SANTANA

2009 AWARD RECIPIENT

READING AND BEYOND | CENTRAL VALLEY

Reading and Beyond and California Bridge Academies provide a cradle-to-career program to create pathways from poverty to opportunity by boosting children’s educational attainment and parental economic success. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizations expanded their capacity to offer vital lifelines to children and families by combining new funding with existing programs. For example, the organizations directed CARES Act funding to support much-needed housing and food assistance efforts, reaching an estimated 12,000 households; and worked with the local United Way’s 2-1-1 to connect individuals with vital services such as rent and mortgage assistance, food and shelter, healthcare, and job training. Additionally, as part of the COVID-19 Equity Project, the organizations provided aid and critical safety net services to Fresno’s immigrant and refugee populations that have been acutely affected by the pandemic. Reading and Beyond and California Bridge Academies are also partnering with the Governor’s Listos California Emergency Preparedness Campaign to deliver culturally appropriate resources to families to keep them safe from COVID-19 and natural disasters – like wildfires.

Lessons Learned

Students cannot advance academically if their parents do not have a job, housing, or the resources to protect themselves and their families when disaster strikes. In a global pandemic, and with the threat of wildfires and other disasters, community-based organizations provided targeted, needs-based services to vulnerable families (e.g., low-income, English-learners, unhoused, and immigrants) to help them recover, stay resilient, and keep their kids in school.

Policy Consideration: Addressing systemic barriers within existing disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts (in school, at home, and in the community) will be critical for the long-term resilience of all Californians.

About the Leadership Awards

The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards recognize leaders whose innovative solutions to critical state challenges improve people’s lives, create opportunity, and contribute to a better California.

To learn more about the program or the 100 Leadership Award recipients, please visit www.IrvineAwards.org.