In the aftermath of the pandemic, many families have struggled to find stability.\textsuperscript{1} Poverty and the instability it creates, compounded by the challenges of everyday life, manifest in inherent barriers to education. Children in families facing poverty-related challenges tend to struggle with behavioral management, higher rates of grade repetition, and higher dropout rates.\textsuperscript{2}

The schools we visited leveraged charter adaptability to pivot and meet students’ and families’ needs, recognizing that strong relationships with families will help support student learning and success.\textsuperscript{3}

This case study examines the question: How might we better support students and families in poverty as they navigate crises?

**Methodology**

From January through June 2023, we visited 10 schools to learn more about their efforts to serve families in poverty and conducted interviews with charter associations and authorizers as well as members of the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition. In addition, we surveyed nearly 150 public charter school leaders and 100 public charter school teachers and support staff across the country.
**Strategies**

Through these efforts, we identified a variety of strategies to support families:

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<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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| Providing direct and in-kind donations to help families address basic needs | School offers grocery store gift cards to food-insecure families.  
School offers no-cost uniforms for low-income families.  
School provides laundry machine access for families to use free of charge. |
| Providing direct assistance to help families navigate crises            | School provides direct assistance to families and get connected with social services.                                                       |
| Offering parents tutoring and counseling                                | School sponsors parent tutoring programs to support learning English or earning a certificate of high school equivalency.  
School offers family counseling to support families navigating life crises and offer insights on how to best support their children. |
| Cultivating community and belonging                                     | School creates a booster club so that families can get more involved.  
School coordinates fairs throughout the year to mark special occasions, including holidays important to communities it serves, such as the Lunar New Year. |
| Offering after-school opportunities for families                         | School offers after-school programs.  
School allows students and families after-school access to the school’s library, so that parents can check out books to promote student literacy. |
Helping families in poverty navigate crises

This case study focuses on one of the strategies that we saw in the site visit schools — helping families in poverty navigate crises.

While many of the schools we visited implemented programs to support students and families, two schools in particular — Rocketship Mosaic and Washington Latin — had notably wide-reaching formal programs.⁴

Like many schools, Rocketship Mosaic and Washington Latin saw students disengage from school during the pandemic and watched attendance rates drop, both during and after the pandemic. Though these schools were making efforts to reengage students and families, they found that many students still weren’t coming to school and many families seemed to struggle with keeping their children consistently present. When staff investigated these issues further, both schools found that families’ struggles with basic life challenges were the root cause. Families were dealing with issues like housing insecurity, food instability, and health crises. The schools recognized that they could not expect students to engage wholeheartedly with academics before attending to these issues, and they set out to help students and their families navigate these challenges. Below we describe how each school has structured its program.

Rocketship’s Care Corps

Rocketship Mosaic is a growing elementary school in San Jose, California. The school comprises primarily Asian and Latinx students, with the vast majority of students coming from low-income families and households where the dominant language spoken in the home is something other than English.⁵ The school also has a particularly high proportion of students from families experiencing homelessness, 6.5%.⁶ By comparison, the district average for students experiencing homelessness the same year was less than 1%.⁷

Rocketship originally designed Care Corps to respond to the food, housing, and mental health needs of its families.⁸ As described by a Care Corps coordinator, “Care Corps helped to bridge that connection between families and the school to community-based organizations.” The program helped to make families feel that they weren’t alone and that they were part of the broader school community.

Rocketship has since extended the program beyond supporting families who are food or housing insecure to families in poverty or those who are undocumented. Care Corps connects families with resources such as food, housing, mental health, and immigration help. This program helps provide families with the tools they need to maintain familial stability, which allows students to focus on learning and enables parents to better support their children in their learning efforts.
FORMAL PROGRAMS TO HELP FAMILIES IN POVERTY NAVIGATE CRISIS

One parent described the care and attention her son received from the Care Corps coordinator when the son was going through chemotherapy:

“It was just a really tough time for him that whole year. [The Care Corps coordinator] she’s always been there, just a message away or call away. To myself, I’m a single parent, whenever I speak to [the coordinator] about some type of situation that I’m having, she’ll always immediately get on the computer and start looking for resources. I was struggling with rent. She was able to give me resources for that. I was struggling for food; she gave me resources for that. I mean, even with my son, she’ll say, ‘Oh, I’ll pick him up and I’ll drop him off.’”

ROCKETSHIP PARENT

The program, funded by a five-year California Community Schools Partnership grant, is staffed by 16 staff members. There is a full-time coordinator at each of the 13 schools and two managers provide network-level support, with each overseeing six care coordinators. The program has an associate director who oversees the two managers and one care coordinator.

The staff have weekly touch points to talk through trends, goals, and deliverables. Managers meet with each of the Care Corps coordinators one-on-one once a week. On Wednesdays, they have a 30-minute midweek huddle to share how their week is going and to align on weekly priorities. On Thursdays, they conduct an hour of case consultations, where coordinators can work together to find solutions or resources for their most difficult cases. On Fridays, they have training for three and a half hours. The training includes professional development around topics such as documentation, how to work with families dealing with trauma, and what information to gather from families. During training, they also may bring in other programs or agencies to either collaborate or learn more about the other agencies’ services. For example, Care Corps invited the City of San Jose’s homeless prevention program to train staff on their services and referral intakes. Bringing in other agencies helps to “create a fluid system” where programs can understand one another’s missions and build upon each other’s work. Similarly, they partnered with the Santa Clara County Behavioral Health Department to certify staff in becoming Mental Health First Aid responders.
Rocketship Mosaic credits the success of the Care Corps program to the support of the Care Corps coordinators, school leadership, and teacher support and buy-in, as well as the intentional approach in establishing relationships with community-based organizations to provide the best resources and experience for their families and students.

**Washington Latin’s Department of Integrated Services**

Washington Latin is an intentionally diverse charter high school in Washington, D.C. Unlike most public schools in the city, there is no racial majority at Washington Latin. Roughly 43% of students attending the school are white, 37% are Black, 10% are Latinx, 6% are multiracial, and 3% are Asian.\(^\text{10}\) Approximately 12% of the school’s students are considered “at-risk,”\(^\text{11}\) which is defined by the District of Columbia as students who are experiencing homelessness, engaged with the foster system, qualify for public assistance, or, for high school students, are overaged and under-credited.\(^\text{12}\)

As the pandemic began, Washington Latin responded quickly by staffing up its Department of Integrated Services. This department, only created in the fall of 2019, is designed to help students classified as at-risk (which the school calls STARs) and their families in crisis better connect with social service programs available in their community.

Integrated Services staff provide an array of services that help students and families manage crises and address financial hardships, including home visits, mobile internet hot spots for students who can’t afford them, and additional targeted support. Integrated Services also works with families to create attendance plans for students. The plans are created in consultation with parents, students, and school administrators and explain what everyone involved with a student’s education will do to help them improve their attendance and limit truancy concerns. Integrated Services administrators regularly meet with students to discuss their needs and how the department staff can help support students and their families. They also work with students’ teachers and other school staff to make sure that teachers are working as a team to help students and their families in their time of crisis. For instance, the Integrated Services directors sit in on meetings to advocate on behalf of the students they represent to ensure that teachers understand and respect the academic and familial challenges students might be dealing with.

Serving roughly 100 students, Integrated Services staff coordinate with the school’s director of mental health, academic team leaders, and individual teachers to support students and ensure that they and their families have the help they need.
Conclusion

Flexibility and autonomy are crucial elements to the success of charter schools, and they have also been critical to the success of the programs and initiatives used by the schools we visited to support families in poverty.

A charter local educational agency completely independent from the local school district, Washington Latin can decide for itself how to implement its program and how to cater these supports to its specific student and family population. Likewise, though it is a part of the Rocketship Charter School Network, Rocketship Mosaic can decide for itself how to implement programs that support the unique needs of their specific student and family populations.

Washington Latin and Rocketship Mosaic’s ability to innovate allowed them to create programs that have greatly benefited their communities. Care Corps and the Department of Integrated Services are helping these schools ensure that they put the right services in place to support students and families, as well as establish a culture where families know that they can turn to their school for support. In the aftermath of the pandemic, as many families are struggling, these programs are helping their schools to meet important needs and fill critical roles in the lives of families.

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4 Uplift Education also has a program for Families in Transition. The program will be expanded during the 2023–24 school year as part of a federal grant, https://www.upliftparent.org/Page/15638.

FORMAL PROGRAMS TO HELP FAMILIES IN POVERTY NAVIGATE CRIPES

6 Ibid.
11 Ibid.