CHALLENGES BEFORE THE PANDEMIC ARE NOW CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
Where engagement gaps have existed before, disconnects from the school may increase if districts are not intentional in their outreach.

DIGITAL ACCESS & CONNECTIVITY
According to the American Community Survey (2014-2018),10.7% of PA households with residents under 18 years of age, have no internet.

116,892 of Pennsylvania homes with family member(s) 18 years old and under have no computer.

DISCRIMINATION
1135 coronavirus-connected racially driven incidents aimed at Asian Americans between March 19th and April 1st.

FOOD INSTABILITY
According to PDE 54.3% of Pennsylvania students are enrolled in the federal free and reduced lunch program. However, in several schools, 100% of the student population is enrolled in this program.

TRANSPORTATION
According to the American Community Survey (2012-2016) about 44% of Pennsylvania households making between $10,000 and $19,999 do not own a car.

HOUSING
Students living in overcrowded multi-family housing are more susceptible to the virus because of the inability for them to social distance.

MENTAL HEALTH & TRAUMA
During the 2008-09 recession, research conducted through UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh found a 240% increase in abusive head trauma in children 5 or younger across 23 counties.
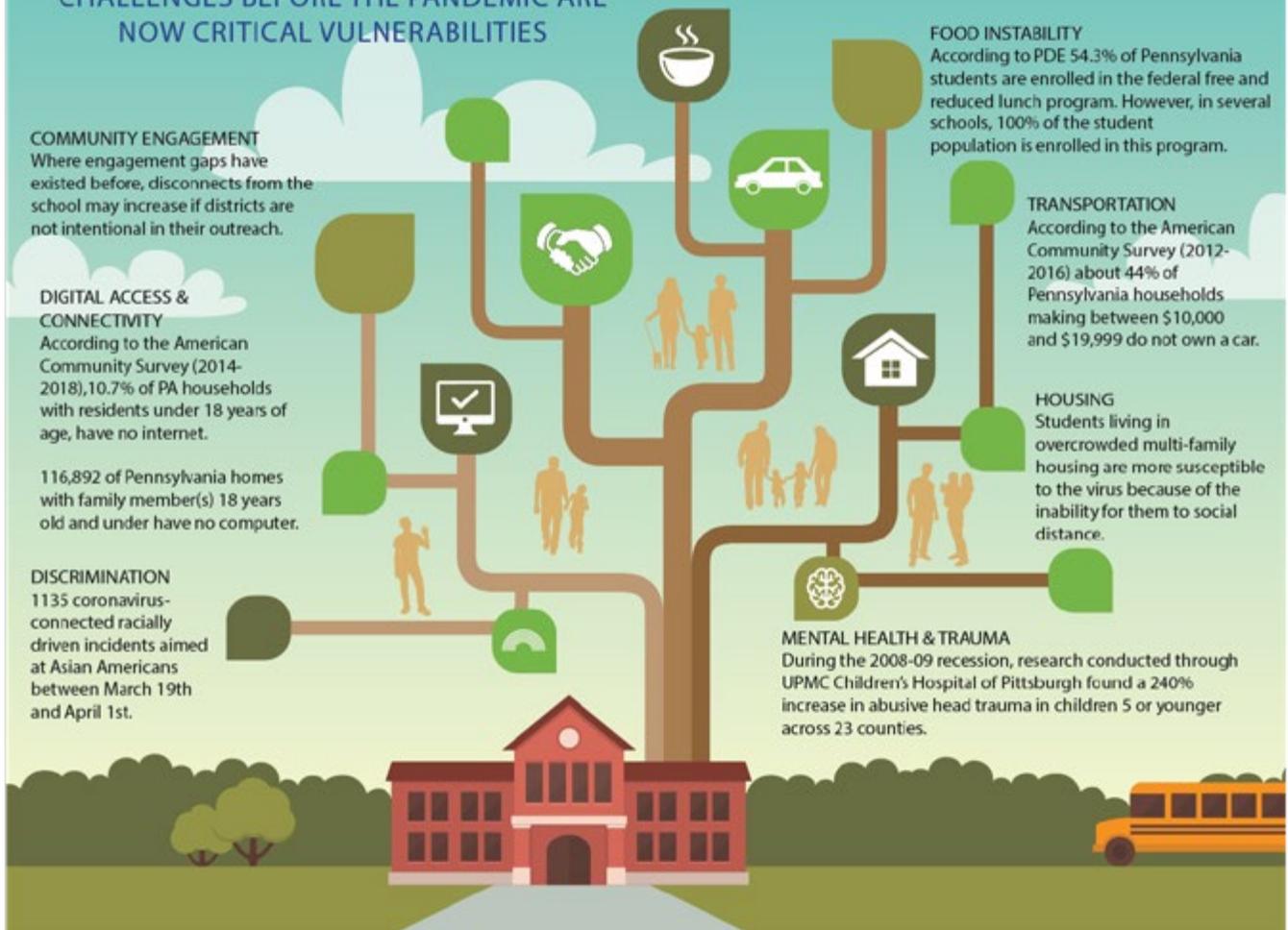
Equity is "the just and fair distribution of resources based upon each individual student's needs. Equitable resources include funding, programs, policies, initiatives, and supports that target each student's unique background and school context to guarantee that all students have equal access to a high-quality education" (PSBA, 2018)

INEQUITY AND COVID-19: A MASSIVE INEQUITY ACCELERANT

Imagine a stone falling into a still pond and the ripples that form on the pond's surface lasting long after it hits. That stone is the COVID-19 pandemic and it's been dropped into the center of community and student populations that comprise our most vulnerable. The shutdown of schools and disconnect from what is, in some instances, a sustaining connection to necessary supports, has been a massive disruptor in the lives of those who can least absorb the impact. Add to it business closures and unemployment and a tenuous situation becomes dire.

Cause-and-effect has become a daily dialogue among key decision makers since the start of the COVID-19 induced global pandemic. Decisions are made despite many unknowns about the virus and its consequences. With school closures and stay-at-home orders as part of the education equation, school leaders and educators have been placed in a rare and unchartered seat at the core of our communities across the country.

Cause—COVID-19 Coronavirus deemed a public hazard and health emergency

Effects—

1st layer effects: School closures, business closures, stay-at-home orders

2nd layer effects: School leaders struggle to support the academic, nutrition and safety needs of students while they are outside of the school building.

3rd layer effects: Economic challenges for businesses, families and districts. Social and emotional challenges for school directors, administration, professional and support staff and students.

4th layer effects: Potential widening of achievement and opportunity gaps within and between school districts.

From March 17, 2020 to May 28, 2020, over 40 million persons nationwide and 2.1 million in Pennsylvania filed for unemployment benefits. These employment and economic inequities will lead to more students in poverty, students with mental health needs, as well as budgetary concerns for districts and communities.

Like any other state, in Pennsylvania's 500 public school districts, students rely upon the education system for much more than their education. And as we are keenly observing, their families' ability to thrive or even just survive also partially rests upon that same school district foundation and system of support.

The closure of schools and businesses has focused an intense lens on the inequities and barriers to opportunity among students, families, schools and districts. And while longstanding issues of inequity existed before the pandemic, extenuating circumstances such as stay-at-home orders, long-term school closures, business closures and soaring unemployment rates have become an explosion in the middle of it all. The damage in and among the students and families most in-jeopardy warrants a dedicated and immediate equity initiative with support from all areas of the education system at the state and local level.

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A majority of Pennsylvania students rely on the school system for access not only to academic instruction but also to basic needs like food and health care. Many vulnerable students do not have access to technology and devices or broadband internet outside of school. In a school closure, the existing inequity widens as vulnerable students lose access. Their learning and development gaps deepen if they also experience greater food insecurity, diminished health care access and additional trauma in home situations without the school supports to mitigate these harmful effects. Compounding these factors for students may be a lack of access to mental health supports and/or a lack of cultural competency in their instruction. Some vulnerable students will have existing language barriers and discrimination that will be even more difficult to navigate during the COVID-19 crisis.

District and school leaders have been forced to rapidly mobilize to meet not only education needs but also address safety, nutrition and technology needs of students, professional staff, families and community members. The COVID-19 crisis poses an urgent opportunity to center equity. In moving toward a solution, the first step should be to identify the disparities which may have been created, amplified or deepened by the pandemic. Although there are additional categories of inequity, the following provide a focus on some of the most acute disparities that a school system should acknowledge and address.

1. **Discrimination:** The Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council has reported 1,135 coronavirus-connected racially driven incidents aimed at Asian Americans occurring between March 19th to April 1st. Reports of incidents include everything from online and verbal harassment, to physical assault, vandalism, workplace discrimination and individuals being discriminatingly banned from private businesses.

2. **Digital Access and Connectivity:** School communication channels often require access to internet, internet connected devices and/or phones. Students who live in poverty, rural or remote communities, homes where there are language barriers and those with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to adequate and effective digital tools and resources.
(To learn more about this topic, click here for a digital equity webinar recorded in April 2019)

3. **Cultural Response and Outreach:** Culturally responsive practices promote the inclusion of students' cultural referents in all aspects of learning, school experiences and student and family engagement. Beyond the instruction that is occurring online and through devices, students who lack support will struggle even more to find relevant connection to the lessons and materials provided. Engagement gaps will widen without intentional outreach, specifically to families who have experienced barriers to engagement in the past, such as low-income parents, single parents, parents of color, parents who are essential workers and limited English proficient parents. Effective communication with students is critical, but, in addition, communication between parents and the school is essential for student success.
(To learn more about this topic, click here for the Cultural Competency in Education webinar, which was recorded in January 2019)

4. **Food Instability:** A majority of economically disadvantaged students rely on the free and discounted meals provided at schools, therefore requiring districts and schools to find flexible ways to provide meals for students during the shutdown. According to PDE, 54.3% of Pennsylvania students are enrolled in the federal free and reduced lunch program. However, in several schools, 100% of the student population is enrolled in this program.

5. **Transportation:** With transportation services reduced to mitigate the spread of the virus and nearly 44% of Pennsylvania households earning between $10,000 and $19,999 without access to a car, vulnerable persons may struggle to access food services, education services, places of employment and health care services (*See* American Community Survey, 2012-2016).

6. **Housing:** Students who live in overcrowded multi-family housing or who experience homelessness may not be able to achieve recommended social distancing, while students in rural communities may live far from community resources. These students and their families are far more susceptible to the to the impacts of the virus.

7. **Trauma and Mental Health:** Access to mental health treatment and community resources has been compromised, particularly in homes where technology providing virtual access is not present. Fear, anxiety and isolation may exacerbate environments where there is existing trauma. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Children found instances of sexual abuse and domestic violence increases during times of crises. Teachers, counselors and school staff, who are mandated reporters for child abuse, are not able to connect with and monitor students in the same way to ensure they are safe and basic needs are being met.