









## DEAN'S LETTER



Fall 2020

Dear Friends,

In the face of the adversity brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, HGSE has worked hard not only to pivot our own teaching and operations, but also to respond to the urgent needs of educators and families. The pandemic exposed existing inequities while also causing unprecedented threats to access and basic needs for students across the country.

Among the initiatives HGSE launched to serve the field amid the pandemic, the Dean's Education Fellows program is especially significant.

The program was enormously successful in placing our recent graduates into roles designed to support districts facing challenges related to COVID-19. Thanks to generous donors, partners, and friends, we were able to match 26 graduates by skill and interest with schools and districts across the country, from Boston and Cambridge to Chicago, San Antonio, Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, and more. From aiding the districts in reopening planning to curriculum design to teacher professionalization, these recent graduates applied what they learned at HGSE — in places where their help was needed most.

In the following pages, you will meet these graduates and read, in their own words, how their work during the summer of 2020 made an impact on the districts around the country — as well as on the fellows themselves — as they helped to prepare for an unpredictable and unprecedented school year.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bridget Terry Long". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Bridget Terry Long  
Dean  
Saris Professor of Education and Economics  
Harvard Graduate School of Education



**KWAME ADAMS**  
BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Being a part of this fellowship was rewarding as I got to work on a project that I know will directly impact students, families, and the community at large in a very meaningful way. Supporting

in the creation of a community asset map for Boston was meaningful for me considering I am from Boston and I believe it is important to show the multitude of organizations that exist here and how they can support the students and families in our district. Oftentimes, there is a deficit lens placed on the city, especially in regard to its Black community, and it was important to make sure that all communities were represented on this map and that these organizations represented the diversity in the city. This project was rewarding as it is a step forward in the right direction as we are highlighting both services in the community and increasing access.



**ELIJAH ARMSTRONG**  
BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I was ecstatic to be one of the students chosen to be one of the inaugural Dean's Education Fellows. I was placed with BuildBPS, which is the 10-year plan for constructing and rearranging

schools in Boston. My role was to look at existing research on school transfers, as well as to analyze how challenges related to school transfers play out in Boston Public Schools (BPS) specifically. I am proud to know that the work that I did will be used by BPS to help provide students with a more equitable education experience going forward, as well as to serve the most marginalized communities in Boston.

“Through diligent research and well-informed communication and decision-making, we helped to strengthen the capacity and synergy of the district community to ensure safety, wellness, learning, and equity in schools amidst a pandemic.” — JINGXIN BAO



**JINGXIN BAO**  
SAINT LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

As a Dean's Education Fellow, I joined the Saint Louis Public School District Restart Task Force to support the district in a safe reopening and to facilitate a seamless transition between in-person

and virtual learning for fall 2020. Our work engaged a broad range of stakeholders to collaborate for a safe reopening and efficient learning for all. Through diligent research and well-informed communication and decision-making, we helped to strengthen the capacity and synergy of the district community to ensure safety, wellness, learning, and equity in schools amidst a pandemic.

The knowledge and experience that we developed and shared will also bring confidence to the community when tackling further uncertainties and challenges. I was most impressed by the leadership of the district which demonstrated grace, professionalism, devotion, flexibility, and adaptability. Leadership under a pressure such as COVID-19 is full of complications and one has to be brave to be decisive and have no fear of making mistakes. Perfectionism is the enemy of progression, as it is said. And I have learned it profoundly through this fellowship.



**CASSANDRA BAPTISTE**  
BALTIMORE CITY  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

As a Dean's Education Fellow, I supported the Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) in aligning the district's newly revamped Instructional Framework and

Rubric to the National Standards for Quality Online Learning. From there I collaborated with various stakeholders and created professional development materials for administrators to perform teacher evaluations in a virtual setting. I also developed guidance documents for teachers and professional development facilitators to refer to when making connections between the instructional framework, and best practices for online teaching and learning. To ground the work in academic research and proven methodologies, I collaborated with Sandra Okonofua, my amazing co-fellow. Together we created a matrix of peer-reviewed articles on virtual learning, each aligned to an indicator of the Instructional Framework and Rubric.

The unique experience of supporting a large urban school district in the midst of a global health pandemic impacted me in a multitude of ways. While at Baltimore City Schools I had the opportunity to collaborate across central office departments, and I witnessed high-performing leadership in a time of crisis. It was refreshing to have intentional conversations with key leaders from across the district about how my work would impact classroom teachers and, ultimately, students. As a result, so long as I serve in the field of education, my work with BCPS will always be a reminder to keep teachers at the forefront, and students at the center of all that I do.

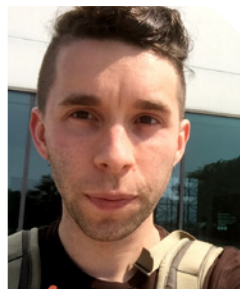


**JANETTE BARBOSA**  
NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT  
OF EDUCATION

During my fellowship, I worked on two buckets of projects: 1) Data collection and analysis — where I developed metrics, collected data, and analyzed it to

understand family engagement best practices, and 2) I directed and produced a training video on best practices for bilingual school staff across all New York City Public Schools. For data collection and analysis, I was able to develop data collection metrics that were inclusive of many stakeholders and their experiences with the Translation and Interpretation Unit, and I was able to analyze their responses in a way that highlighted these experiences fully. This type of data collection and analysis will help the unit understand best practices as they move forward this school year. For the training video, I was able to meet legal requirements to better support school staff with the goal of increasing educational equity for students with disabilities and their families.

Professionally, although I've always been passionate about access and equity, this fellowship reminded me of the role that translation and interpretation services should have within these conversations, and it affirmed my interest in leadership work within a school district. I look forward to taking everything that I learned with me to my new role at DC Public Schools.



**DAVID BATES**  
GWINNETT COUNTY PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS (GEORGIA)

This fellowship enabled me to tackle many equity issues that I've grown increasingly concerned with since the pandemic started. As more students find themselves

in acutely precarious states, I wanted to work this summer on rebuilding an infrastructure of support so that all children and families have the opportunity to flourish.

I had two main projects with the Office of Research & Evaluation at Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS). The first was writing a literature review in which I was concerned with the research about toxic stress and resilience, learning loss due to the physical closure of schools, and digital learning environments. The goal of this paper was to create theory that will motivate future empirical studies carried out by GCPS. My second project was working on the initial phase of a sampling study. I created a data-informed sampling paradigm so that it will be possible to get generalizable results about potential learning loss related to the physical closure of schools without testing every student in the district. The superintendent is really excited about this project because it will be possible for him to know something about all of his schools without the district having to go through the potential human and economic costs of testing every student. I specifically worked on writing a program in [the R programming language] that used extant district data to find an optimal sample size for each school in the district. Whenever students are able to be tested again in person, the district will have this program and principals will know how many students they need to test.



**IAN BOTT**  
NEW YORK CITY  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Coming into the Dean's Education Fellowship, I hoped to be involved in responding to this unique and potentially transformative time in the field of education. New York

City had been heavily disrupted by COVID in the spring and so my initial priority was to understand the challenges students in district are facing and the steps the Department of Education is taking to adapt. The district identified a need to assemble resources that will help ensure that remote learning is a continuation of in-person learning, and that synchronous and asynchronous instruction connect to create a cohesive learning experience for students.

Over the summer the curriculum team sought to pinpoint priority standards and learning goals by content and grade level that could support the continuity of high-quality instruction. My work focused on curating a repository of digital resources for each of these learning goals in math and English language arts, so that these can be shared with teachers and used to improve students' experiences as they interact with content. In assessing these digital curriculum resources, I've learned that although many resources are available, there is a great deal of variation in quality, and districts like New York City also have a lot of considerations about how these resources fit into budgetary constraints.

This is a time that organizations across all levels of education are grappling with how to make remote learning accessible and effective, and I'm looking forward to continued exploration around how digital tools and resources can be leveraged to promote learning for all. Although I believe that digital learning has the opportunity to disrupt education, it will require a great deal of human ingenuity and support to ensure its effective implementation at scale.



**TOBI BRITTON**  
DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I have been profoundly moved by the level of care and dedication exhibited by the district leaders I have worked with. Despite unrelenting uncertainty and challenges this summer, they abided

by a mission to serve their community and make the best possible decisions for their students. I believe the work we did collectively this summer will have an impact on what teachers and students are expected to prioritize, with a profound focus on trauma-informed pedagogy and social-emotional wellness. I feel honored to have been a part of the Denver Public Schools (DPS) team, and I am left with a resounding desire to continue using COVID-19 as an opportunity to reinvent educational systems to be more equitable. I am grateful for the opportunity and want to extend a sincere thank you to DPS and all of those that made the fellowship possible.

“As more students find themselves in acutely precarious states, I wanted to work this summer on rebuilding an infrastructure of support so that all children and families have the opportunity to flourish.”

— DAVID BATES





**PHIL CHEW**  
BALTIMORE CITY  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Through the Dean's Education Fellowship with the Office of Equity, I led the research and strategy of designing an equity-grounded framework to reimagine the enrollment

policy for Baltimore City's selective entrance criteria high schools and the city's broader middle and high school enrollment strategy.

Building on my previous experience with similar work in New York City's public schools, this fellowship reinforced the reality that school districts are broadly similar to and simultaneously distinct from one another. The shared history of public education is colored by the unique history and story of each city. As such, it is important to first lead by listening for the unique context of each district. Frameworks and theories grounded in research are helpful to inform similar problems of practice across districts, but these need to be understood within the nuance of each district. In this case, Baltimore City is a city of high schools that are central to the identity of communities. Therefore, any meaningful and sustainable change to enrollment policies needs to be co-created in close collaboration with the schools' alumni community. To lead this work, principled leadership is critically important. Principled leadership of public school districts has the capacity to lead by listening to, and sincerely empathizing with students, families, educators, and community members; a visionary foresight for equitable schools for all communities; and, a strategy to sustainably lead and implement policies and practices to realize that vision. Such leadership is truly embodied by Sonja Santelises, Tracey Durant, and Tina Hike-Hubbard's leadership of Baltimore City Public Schools, under whom I am fortunate to have worked.



**CAROLINE D'ANDREA**  
BIBB COUNTY SCHOOL  
DISTRICT (GEORGIA)

When I began the fellowship, I recognized the limited capacity of the district to make necessary changes during COVID while still needing to move forward with

as much, if not more, urgency and efficiency. While my fellowship's focus was strategic data analysis, this focus took on several meanings and forms throughout the summer. When originally reviewing data visualizations, I recognized that the district would not be able to measure attendance in typical ways for the upcoming school year. By researching engagement metrics and understanding the technology and resources available, I recommended alternative ways in which the district can understand how students are showing up for school. Ideally, these measures will continue past COVID, with districts implementing an equity lens in defining student engagement. I find it essential to underscore the unique backgrounds and resources that each student brings to the classroom and understand how this impacts their presence. I have a newfound appreciation for the moving parts that district leadership juggle every day, and I realize the importance of communication and collaboration across stakeholder groups and districts in order to create the best possible learning environments for our students.

As I continue my work in the field, I know that my time as a fellow will be an invaluable experience for informing how I approach problem solving, community collaborations, and project design. I look forward to seeing the early learning outcomes as this work unfolds and moves into the future.





**MAGGIE GALLAGHER**  
BROWARD COUNTY PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS (FLORIDA)

This past summer I served as a Dean's Fellow for Broward County Public Schools on the district's Strategic Initiative Management team. This team is usually tasked with

managing 21 working teams towards meeting the goals of their five-year strategic plan. Given the moment, they were also tasked with overseeing 16 "game plan" leads for school reopening. Projects moved fast, so I played many, many different roles in each of them. On the strategic plan front, I gave feedback to working teams on their metrics and accomplishments, helped write narrative for the annual outcomes report, recommended a set of equitable metrics for school reopening plans that were adopted by the superintendent's cabinet, searched for alignment and misalignment within reopening game plans, and provided feedback and build capacity for my team.

This experience really opened my eyes to the absolute scale of our systems and how difficult it is to rapid change those systems like this summer called us to do. It has me reflecting a lot on how to make systems nimbler and more flexible and do so quickly. And is it possible to do that without doing harm to students and communities? This experience was also a deep immersion about community voice and whose voices are elevated and when and why as well as the power of relationships within big district systems.



**KATI GARNESS**  
GWINNETT COUNTY PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS (GEORGIA)

When I sought the Dean's Education Fellowship, I wanted to support a district as they navigated the new educational landscape created by the COVID-19

pandemic, use the new knowledge I had gained during my year at HGSE, and learn more about working within a district central office.

With Gwinnett, I have been part of an exciting project which partners the Office of Early Learning and the greater community to promote learning and access to resources from birth to 5. I worked to design a Community Ambassadors program which will connect families to local resources and early learning information. Further, I supported the creation and roll-out of a new early learning resource website which launched September 25.

This work has shown me the unique challenges districts face as well as the opportunities for innovation. I was particularly inspired by the Gwinnett's commitment to partnering with the broader community as they pushed this work forward. Through our collaboration with many stakeholders, this project will be sure to have greater success.

As I continue my work in the field, I know that my time as a fellow will be an invaluable experience for informing how I approach problem solving, community collaborations, and project design. I look forward to seeing the early learning outcomes in Gwinnett County as this work unfolds and moves into the future.



**NATASHA JAPANWALA**  
BALTIMORE CITY  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Over the summer, I project managed the implementation of a mesh network in three city schools neighborhoods — an initiative that connected 68 families with a low-cost,

sustainable, and community-based internet solution. The pandemic only exposed the long-standing digital inequity that already existed. By working with stakeholders within and outside the district, I had a chance to help shape a critical project during a critical time. I also had a chance to think deeply about how the systemic issues that impact vulnerable students can be solved, especially since gaps are widening as the pandemic continues.

My own background as an international student from Pakistan is in the non-state sector. I came to HGSE to learn more about educational entrepreneurship, and I was eager to start my own project-based school. My experience over the summer gave me an opportunity to dwell on what transformation within public school systems can look like, and in so doing, helped reorient the trajectory of my career.



**ILAN LEVINE**  
METRO NASHVILLE  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I can say with confidence that I have left my mark on the education field in Metro Nashville. With my support and thought partnership, 85 students who previously

did not academically qualify to take college-level classes are now currently enrolled in a dual enrollment course while being offered additional supports to ensure they succeed. Perhaps most rewarding has been the opportunity to meet and work with so many like-minded professionals whose chief objective is to continue improving the lives of students. I am left, unequivocally, with the drive to continue this work.

“My work has contributed to supporting the district in creating a clear understanding of what equitable communication means and implementing key strategies to inform and hear all families’ voices.”

— LAUREN MURDOCK





## **VANESSA LÓPEZ**

**SAN ANTONIO INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOL DISTRICT (TEXAS)**

The essence of prioritizing employee wellness is key when thinking about returning to school this academic year, whether remotely or in person. The onset of

COVID-19 and the continued police brutality are two pandemics highlighting the systemic inequities present in this country.

One key takeaway I received from engaging with the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) Wellness Project was that we must prioritize wellbeing and care for one another. Through this project, I had the opportunity to assess where SAISD employees were in relation to their own wellbeing, and used those experiences to help address areas of improvement for the district. As a result, I was able to serve as a liaison between community resources and district employees to ensure that support services were available to them via an employee resource webpage and other wellness services. Moving forward, my hope is that the various departments within the district can continue collaborating with one another to provide resources to employees. Engaging in this work has provided me with a deeper understanding of myself as a leader, and the ways that I will show up and advocate for my students as a future school counselor.



## **LAUREN MURDOCK**

**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT  
OF EDUCATION**

During the Dean's Education Fellowship, I worked with the New York City Department of Education (DOE) in the Division of Community Empowerment, Partnerships, and Communications. I began this fellowship looking forward to working with district leaders to learn the district level's organizational structures and strategy processes. A large part of my work in this role as a language access and equity consultant was engaging with community stakeholders and listening to the multitude of voices representing the DOE families. This work was critical to understand the needs and barriers that prevented all families from accessing all district communication. At the beginning of the pandemic, the district relied on frequent and detailed written, electronic updates to keep families informed on school updates related to COVID-19. This strategy discounted families with limited access to the English language, technology, stable housing, and literacy levels needed to comprehend the written correspondences. The strategies and recommendations that I designed for the district prioritized families across the city whose communication needs had been previously disregarded. I led a campaign for robocalls, text messages, and postcards in all 10 district languages to guide families in signing up for their school accounts. This strategy was integral in connecting families with their schools to access all future information and updates beyond the pandemic. My work has contributed to supporting the district in creating a clear understanding of what equitable communication means and implementing key strategies to inform and hear all families' voices.



**SANDRA OKONOFUA**  
BALTIMORE CITY  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I had the privilege of working with a colleague to assist Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) in developing guidance and recommendations to translate its instructional

framework into the remote learning environment. Additionally, my colleague and I developed a resource toolkit containing peer-reviewed research to further support BCPS as they develop and refine their strategy around remote instruction.

During this experience, I learned that when working with school districts, patience, flexibility, and grace are paramount. School districts are complex organizations serving diverse needs and, in an era where everything is changing faster than we can understand, the ability to navigate challenges with patience, flexibility, and grace will allow me to persevere in the midst of uncertainty and better serve the needs of various stakeholders, especially those of students.

“The Dean’s Education Fellowship showed me just how powerful collaboration can be, both in ‘normal’ times and unprecedented ones.”

— SARA SMOLEVITZ



**EMMANUEL PORTILLO**  
LOS ANGELES UNIFIED  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

As a Dean’s Education Fellow, I was looking for an opportunity to use my experiences, skills, and knowledge I gained at HGSE to support my local school

district’s efforts to support families during a time of rapid change, uncertainty, and experimentation. As a fellow at Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), I supported the Local District South (LD South) Superintendent and Equity Office designing a strategic plan that included goals, strategies, and metrics for a team of specialized student population counselors which will be expanded to the rest of the district to meet the most urgent needs of their students and communities.

Through this experience, I learned about the transformative power of listening, building relational trust, fostering collaboration, and the value of centering students, families, and communities in equity-based decision-making. In addition, I learned about the value of critical reflection and how critical it is to carve out this time and space even amidst conflicting priorities. The opportunity to pause and reflect is instrumental to systems and social change even within the uncertainty of the future. I hope to use the experiences I gained through the fellowship to support school districts and education non-profit organizations in Los Angeles County, and identify and design strategies and goals that best support their vision and needs of their respective communities. I am incredibly grateful to LD South, fellows, and faculty for their support throughout this project.





**SHREYA PRAKASH**  
ORANGE COUNTY PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS (FLORIDA)

This summer, I supported Orange County Public Schools, Florida (OCPS) with their first ever strategic district-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) plan. My

responsibilities included conducting a thorough review of best practices in overcoming common pitfalls in SEL implementation at a district level and also vetting and compiling a detailed guide of evidence-based SEL programs for schools to adopt this year. This resource will potentially augment the district's SEL implementation plan and practice and the recommendations provided will also support school leadership to make informed decisions while selecting an SEL program that best suits their needs, thereby impacting the social-emotional well-being of more than 215,700 children. While the resource has been structured to meet OCPS's requirements, I believe that it can be helpful to any school district making decisions about their SEL strategy, especially during this time when there is an urgent need to focus on children's social-emotional wellness.

As an international student, this experience has been especially rewarding as it allowed me to learn about schooling systems in a completely different context. I also appreciated having the opportunity to witness how districts make decisions that cater to such diverse needs by being both responsive and flexible, and learnt that it is possible to make collaborative decisions by listening to voices from stakeholders even on such a large scale. As I recognize the need for systemic inter-agency collaboration to truly support the diverse needs of children, I will certainly be carrying this bird's eye view to enrich my future work.



**SARA SMOLEVITZ**  
CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Dean's Education Fellowship showed me just how powerful collaboration can be, both in "normal" times and unprecedented ones also. Too often, educators feel siloed to their individual

classrooms or schools, and aren't privy to the instruction and experiences occurring at other schools (even if they're in the same school district).

This summer, Cambridge had the idea to bring together educators from each grade level to create digital instructional materials for all teachers in the district to use this fall, in order to alleviate time to focus on making connections with students and families. This was made possible by alleviating the barriers of traffic and scheduling that are often involved when bringing dozens of people from across a city together. Through these educator collaborative meetings, I witnessed the power of teachers sharing experiences with one another, offering their expert guidance, and solving problems together. No one had exactly the answer for what remote learning was supposed to look like, but they each shared pros and cons, and made a plan for how to persevere.

Throughout the field of education, I believe we need to prioritize these conversations and opportunities. We all have a common purpose of providing students the best possible educational experience, and we work best when we put our minds and our experiences together. Looking forward, I hope to continue to support teachers by developing instructional materials and meaningful learning experiences, as well as facilitating opportunities to bring teachers together to support one another.



## **ERIC WASHINGTON**

**SAN ANTONIO INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOL DISTRICT (TEXAS)**

My commitment to education stems from my own edification and awareness of its vitality. As a Dean's Education Fellow partnering with system-level leaders in education, I wanted

to have a multifaceted impact on school culture and students' classroom experience.

The racial and social injustices of 2020 have had an unfathomable impact on the psyche of students. My goals were to shift those raw emotions into opportunities to educate students on the systemic issues of oppression and racism that plague America. I wanted to educate the district on the importance of incorporating inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum. I wanted my overall impact to shift the way marginalized students' and communities' needs were viewed at the district level. We cannot dismantle what we do not understand.

I was extremely ambitious in what I wanted this course to accomplish for district leaders, teachers, students, and families. I felt emboldened since I had earned a seat at the table and my focus was to ensure I articulated diverse perspectives. I am not too far removed from working hands on with students and families in various communities and I wanted to bring those experiences to district conversations. While supporting the district for a finite amount of time, I remained hopeful that I planted seeds to help foster change. I hope that I reshaped mindsets and encouraged others to challenge the status quo.

## **Additional Dean's Education Fellows:**

**TAWANNA CURRENCE-GRANT**, Chicago Public Schools

**SARAH DYKE**, Boston Public Schools

**ALISA DE LOS SANTOS**, Cambridge Public Schools

**YONG LEE**, Boston Public Schools

**AHMED NAJM**, Ferguson-Florissant School District (Missouri)

The Dean's Education Fellows program was facilitated by the Public Education Leadership Project.



