contracting the virus doing outreach programs.

And so we prioritized nutrition, then safety and wellness, and learning last. Basics such as maize, beans, avocados, or yams procured from the school farm incentivized caregivers to pick up free rations and learning packets at the school, three times a week; a bonus if they brought the child in. Completed packets were returned in exchange for new material and replenished rations. Unfortunately, we could not track the children who had been sent away by their caregivers to rural homes to live with surviving grandparents and alleviate hardship — at least until September, when schools would reopen.

Hopes turned dire when the Ministry of Education announced in early July that schools would remain closed until January 2021 and all students would be held back to restart their current grade.

Education was abandoned.

Any future investment plans in infrastructure, cell phone towers, electricity, and subsidized data packages did nothing to assuage the burden of delivering the education and nutrition desperately needed today. This class war meant winners would be those in the upper echelons of the economic pyramid or persons with pure grit to prioritize learning for their children.

Mama Kambua, a 23-year-old single mother of four, all under the age of seven, lives in Nyawita. With schools closed, the lockdown, and being laid off, feeding the kids daily was a struggle she accomplished by any means necessary. Pregnant at age 15, she dropped out of school herself. She did not know where her kids were most of the time and had no time to pick up packages. She felt alone, overwhelmed, and out of options. Wiping her sweaty, tear-stained face with shaky fingers, she sank into a chair and whispered a prayer for her children’s safety, wherever they were. She will send them to grandmother’s in the morning.

Mama Otenga is a 32-year-old. Her husband, a manager at a marketing firm, makes enough for her to stay home in a nicer side of town. For an additional fee to the school, she streams classes online for their kindergartner and second grader. She has even hired help to do household chores and private tutoring while she runs errands.

The impact of the virus for these two families is distinctly different.

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The window purred as it slithered down my car door, letting an autumn breeze in, its chilly feel portending the Minnesota winter. The road wound into a beautiful backdrop of trees, rich, chestnut trunks with deep, rustic-red leaves that seemed ablaze at the tops, burning orange and yellow hues. I turned into my driveway and stopped the car. The garage door slowly opened, revealing no fanfare — no teachers, no drummers nor dancers, and Mama was not sitting under the crabapple tree in front of my house. The freshly mowed grass in the serene suburb that I called home looked pristine. A longing to do more for Kenya overwhelmed me, leaving a deep hole in my chest.

Would donors continue to support a closed school? What about the dropouts? Those children sent out by reckless caregivers to earn a wage or sell moonshine, the ones who endure unchecked abusers or pedophilia; the disenfranchised boys driven to the streets where they smoke glue to escape. What about their pangs of insatiable hunger?

Slumped over the steering wheel, I said a prayer and wept — for a while. I pondered ways to keep everyone on payroll. Layoffs would cause hardship. Perhaps the staff could be farmhands, teachers could be evangelists, safely spreading COVID-19 education with Mama a missionary and the school an altruistic sanctuary for the whole neighborhood.

Irresolute, I felt a quiet knowing. Someday, God will help us make sense of the mess, I thought, pulling into my garage. Yes. Everything was going to be all right.

AKINYI WILLIAMS, ED.M.’16. FOUNDED HOPE FOR THE CHILD TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY AND PROMOTE ADVOCACY BY PROVIDING EDUCATION ACCESS TO POOR CHILDREN, STARTING IN HER HOME COUNTRY, KENYA. SHE CURRENTLY LIVES IN MINNESOTA AND TRAVELS FREQUENTLY TO KENYA TO SUPPORT THE TWO SCHOOLS.
Aim High opened its doors in June 1986, one year after I graduated from the Ed School. Many of my memories of the early years of Aim High are hazy, but I vividly remember the first day. I stood on the sidewalk outside our inaugural school campus in San Francisco early in the morning. There was plenty of excitement and energy but also a high degree of nervousness and uncertainty. Would the kids show up? Would our teachers step up? Would the Morning Circle work? Would our curriculum and activities resonate for kids? The answers to all of those questions turned out, much to my delight, to be yes. Over the ensuing years, Aim High’s free summer
academic and enrichment program has grown to serve more than 2,300 low-income, first-generation Bay Area middle school students annually across 18 campuses.

Thirty-four years later, on June 22, 2020, standing in my kitchen, I felt that familiar anticipation as our team launched our first-ever virtual learning program, Aim High at Home (AH@H). Just two months earlier, in April, we announced to our families that Aim High could not safely operate our traditional, in-person summer program as planned in 2020. In the absence of physical spaces for us to gather, we made our first pivot.

As I have said often during the past four months: Our mission, goals, and values remained exactly the same. Each summer, Aim High offers middle school students five weeks of rigorous academic classes, outdoor education, enrichment opportunities, social/emotional skill building, and college/career exploration to prepare them for the upcoming school year and the eventual transitions to high school and college. What changed this summer was our delivery.

There was never a question about staying the course and stepping up to meet the needs of students and families during this fragile moment. But, we knew that we could not simply take our traditional model and stuff it into a Zoom call. We had to reimagine.

Our first step was to conduct a needs assessment of our students and families. What we heard: community and connection matters most. From there, we created a set of principles to guide our work. One example: See a bigger world, starting with our book club curriculum, which was designed to help students see beyond the walls of their homes by reading and analyzing excerpts from several works including Erika Sanchez’s I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter.

Our work this summer became more critical and urgent after the brutal murder of George Floyd.

Our pre-program week of professional development with 125 educators focused on preparing our staff to respond to this moment. As a result, when AH@H began, all of our teachers were ready to offer students a safe space to process their pain, anger, grief, fear, and frustration. As a white man, my only job during these conversations was/is to listen and learn from our communities of color. We recommitted ourselves to hearing, seeing, and honoring our Black students, their history, and their lived experiences.

After months of sheltering in place amidst the heaviness of this extraordinary moment, middle school students missed their friends and teachers, and our families told us how important it was to reengage with Aim High. And so, the heart of our model was the imperative to build community and connection, even while physically apart. Students received opportunities to process their thoughts and feelings in our Issues & Choices social/emotional youth development course. They also participated in project-based learning — STEAM challenges and book club — to regain lost academic ground and thrive when school begins again.

In addition to academics, we created video-on-demand activities for easy viewing and access, like coding, snack-making, and outdoor adventures, and many live activities in the afternoons, thanks to some incredible partnerships with the American Conservatory Theater, Women’s Audio Mission, and Circus Center, among others. At the end of one of the live yoga classes, the teacher asked students to describe how they were feeling in the Zoom chat box. One student wrote, “I am grateful that I have people who love me.”

On July 24, our students celebrated the last day of AH@H and our 300 ninth-graders graduated from the program. The early returns are in: It worked! Every day, kids saw teachers they knew and loved. Every day, they were learning with trusted peers and friends. And every day, they had fun. That’s what matters most in 2020. There was another bonus, too. Our 125 summer faculty are returning to their schools across the Bay Area equipped with a toolbox to strengthen their virtual teaching skills.

We learned a ton this summer and we’ll take these learnings forward as we look to stretch and deepen our impact in 2021 and beyond. This fall, our top priority is to imagine and implement “Beyond Aim High” to support our students as they return to virtual school and learning. One of our long-time Aim High educators and alumna, Michelle, said: “I just want to embrace all of my students and let them know that there is Aim High love that’s going towards them, there is hope that’s going towards them. I want students and families and educators to dream big — dream vividly, dream in color, and be ready to take this world by storm.”

I am rock-solid certain that innovative, nurturing summer learning will matter more than ever in 2021. The recovery for students who are disproportionately impacted by both the virus and racial injustice will be long and arduous. We are not going anywhere.

We don’t have to replace every single hour, particularly when we’re giving one-on-one attention to our kids. It’s really engaged time in academic learning that’s creating the learning, not necessarily the number of academic minutes in a school day.”

Jennifer McCombs
Senior Policy Researcher, The Rand Corporation, in a Harvard EdCast on Lessons Learned from Summer Learning Loss That Can Be Applied During Virtual Learning

Alec Lee was a high school history teacher before starting Aim High. His son, Kelly (see page 57), a high school humanities teacher in California, enrolled as a master’s student at the Ed School this fall.