Students Experiencing the Digital Divide

A collaborative design sprint with Columbus City Schools

In June 2020, we sought to understand why some Columbus City Schools (CCS) students had not accessed virtual learning content and suggested ways to bolster participation for the 2020-2021 school year.

COLUMBUS CITY SCHOOLS

THE PROBLEM

Beginning in the spring of 2020, we knew that some CCS students had received devices and hotspots to complete online school. We also understood that even if students had devices, they were not all logging into classes. We wanted to help understand what was happening for students and what could be put in place to support them during the 20-21 school year.

THE APPROACH

We partnered with CCS to recruit students to interview. We brought together a design team led by Heather Tsavaris that included designers Chris Rudd, Morgan Vien, and Susie Wise as well as Mark Lomax and Matt Martin from The Columbus Foundation. In addition, four CCS students joined the design team as co-designers. They included: Aariana, Havana, Mitchell, and Neveah.

After framing the challenge, we spent a week executing a Design Sprint that consisted of interviewing multiple CCS students to understand their experience. We then worked during the week to co-create and test solutions that might improve their experience.

THE IMPACT

During the interviews with students we learned that from March-June 2020, some students were feeling abandoned, anxious, and apathetic. We learned that even some students participating in online school felt this way. We also heard that some previously engaged students needed a new "why" for doing school and felt like their time was better spent working at part-time jobs or playing soccer with friends.

Crew Call

One caring adult + five students; 30-minute check-in

Because we had heard from students that not being physically co-located with teachers made it more difficult to get the support they wanted, we wondered how might we help students feel radically supported now, more than ever before. We proposed a "Crew Call" to test if a regular check-in with a trusted adult and several peers might help them feel more supported. At the conclusion of the sprint, Columbus Metropolitan Library further developed and piloted the concept.

We also heard about how disconnected students felt from school and wondered how we might make sure youth have what they need to stay motivated and connected to school. We proposed a "Stoke Box" for students that might arrive at their homes periodically filled with school supplies, snacks, and other meaningful items to let them know how much their teachers and the community cared about them.

Stoke Box

Weekly package delivered to students to provide them with things that they need and want to survive and thrive.

A successful sprint is not just about unearthing learnings and developing interesting prototypes. It is also about how our co-designers have felt after the engagement.

This is some of what we heard from the CCS co-designer students:

"I like how we came together to make a difference in the world."

"It made me feel helpful; I have a little sister and I don't want her to feel she is abandoned."

"I wonder if it will make a difference."

"I want to know what it would look like if this would be school."

"Participating in this makes students know the importance of their voice and they are capable of applying things."

"Gave me a feeling of importance."

"Made me feel like I was doing something good to help ourselves and our peers."

"Asking us to join this project, to have our voice heard increased our voice and empowers us."

2021