A Better Life?
Tested

After a year of holding classes on Zoom, schools across the country have returned to in-person learning this fall. Producer Katelynn Laws visits the rural town of Monroe, North Carolina, a community with a large Latino population, to learn how students are making up for what many say was a lost year.

Mia Warren: This is *A Better Life?* a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds about the impact of Covid-19 on immigrants. I'm Mia Warren.

After a year of staying at home and attending classes online, students across the country are back in the classroom. And while in-person learning has resumed, so have the educational inequities facing Latinos. According to some studies, Covid has widened the educational gap separating Latino students from White students.

Before the pandemic, that gap was slowly, but steadily, shrinking. The high school graduation rate among Latinos was increasing, as was the number of Latinos going to college. Those are national trends, and we wanted to get a sense of what's happening in a specific school, in a specific state.

North Carolina has the sixth fastest-growing Latino population in the country. Enrollment in North Carolina public schools has been increasing in recent decades, with Latinos accounting for nearly half of that growth.

The city of Monroe is one place where this trend is vividly on display. At the local high school, nearly two-thirds of the students are Latino. Producer Katelynn Laws visited Monroe High to get a sense of how the school year is going so far. Hey, Katelynn.

Katelynn Laws: Hi Mia.

Mia: Katelynn, give us an idea of the area — Monroe and the surrounding county.

Katelynn: Monroe is the county seat of Union County, which has some suburban areas to the west but is otherwise largely rural. Union County is overwhelmingly White — over four-fifths of the population. I've driven to Monroe a couple of times now. When you enter from the edges of town, there really isn't much except for farmland. This time of year, crops are being harvested, so all that's left are these long golden-orange fields.

But when you start to enter Monroe proper, it's like you flip a switch. You're almost immediately greeted with Spanish — churches, laundromats, grocery stores — all their signage in Spanish. And so it turns out that in the late '90s and early 2000s, a lot of Latino immigrants were finding work in Charlotte, one of North Carolina's major cities, but settling in Monroe because it was only 40 minutes away with much cheaper housing.

This population shift is represented really well at Monroe High. The school is fairly small, it's a white building with some trailers around it. There are about 1000 students at the school. As we said, about two-thirds of the student body is Latino, 29 percent is Black and just 10 percent of the students are White, even though, as I mentioned, the population of the county as a whole is predominantly White.

Part of this has to do with a trend we're seeing where White students are leaving traditional public schools for charter schools. Just ten minutes away from Monroe High, Union Academy's student body is about 70% White.

Mia: And what has the Covid situation been like?

Katelynn: Covid cases in North Carolina have been going down after a spike in cases we saw over the summer, right before school started. But cases are still pretty high, and Union County is considered a high transmission area, so Covid is still very much a concern.

Latinos make up about a tenth of North Carolina's total population, but last summer they accounted for almost half of all Covid cases in the state. A significant portion of these infections happened at meat processing plants and other essential businesses where people couldn't maintain the recommended distance. These are industries that employ a significant number of Black and Latino people.

And Monroe High is just a 5-minute drive from a chicken processing plant.

Mia: So, with students back in person, what has the Covid policy been at Monroe High?

Katelynn: There are over a hundred school districts in North Carolina, and Union County is one of only five that don't require masks in school. I spoke with a student at Monroe High, a senior named Alexis, and she told me a bit about the mask policy.

> Alexis: So the mask is like, it's optional. You can wear your mask or you don't have to. But if you do wear it, you have to wear it the right way. And if you don't they'll just say you can take it off you're not going to wear it the right way, basically.

Katelynn: We asked school officials to comment on their mask policy, but they refused. But after speaking with students and reading local news outlets, it's pretty clear that Union County's approach to Covid has been contentious. Three weeks into the school year they had over 7000 students and staff quarantined, and almost 500 people tested positive for Covid.

On September 13th, the county school board voted 8-1 to stop quarantining and contact tracing for students who weren't necessarily sick, but potentially exposed to Covid. When the North Carolina Department of Health threatened to take legal action, the school board reinstated the quarantining and contact tracing policies.

Mia: Wow. So, after speaking with students, did you get an idea of how they feel about these policies at their school?

Katelynn: There's definitely a level of apprehension among the students I spoke to. A lot of students mentioned that it's not like the school isn't trying, on some level, to make things a bit safer — there were frequent mentions of the school rerouting hallway traffic to try to limit crowds during class changes.

But without requiring masks, some students who chose not to wear them have come to school unaware they are infected with Covid and put others at risk. This happened to Erika, a junior I spoke with.

> Erika: I mean, the first day they tried to send me home, but they already sent 15 kids home the same first day. Second day is more and more.
>
> I mean, I did vaccinate. But the thing about it is just I had two masks on, cause I'm paranoid about stuff like that. But I had two masks on. So they asked me if my mask was any time down? I said no, so they didn't send me home.
>
> But please y'all, wear the mask. They're sending people home too much, and just 'cause you are close to somebody who had Corona. Just wear the mask. It's not that hard.

Mia: How are students feeling about being back in the classroom?

Katelynn: A lot of students are actually pretty excited to be back in school. Last year was tough, kids were struggling with online learning. A senior at Monroe, Victor, was telling me that last year he felt like he was on his own a lot of the time.

> Victor: It's like we were, like, teaching ourselves basically. 'Cause, you could only do so much with Zoom, and the teachers were occupied with other students at times and things like that. So, we couldn't, like, just ask the teacher, like, during class or anything like that. Because, they gotta get their lesson done and go onto the next class, you know.

Katelynn: And this isn't uncommon, last year put kids behind in school. For Latino kids specifically, it's six months in math and five months in reading, compared to about four and three months for White students. So there's a level of in-person support that they're really glad to have back.

Mia: So, as we close out this conversation, I'm interested in knowing why were you interested in Monroe, specifically?

Katelynn: I'm not from Monroe, but I am a Latina from North Carolina, and I have gone through the state's school system. I graduated high school just two years ago, and now I'm a student at UNC-Chapel Hill, which is one of the state's public universities.

And I think Monroe is a great example of the Latino population that exists all over the state. Public schools where Latino students make up a majority of the student body are increasingly common. You know, part of this is because the Latino community has been here and is embedded in North Carolina. Like I mentioned earlier, the immigrant population in Monroe really started to grow nearly 3 decades ago.

And, as we'll hear more later on, it's a community that we're not necessarily supporting to the best of our ability.

Mia: Thanks, Katelynn.

Katelynn: Thank you, Mia.

Mia: Katelynn mentioned how during Covid, Latino students in North Carolina fell behind even more than White students, and the education gap is a reality across the state for students of color. To get a better handle on the educational disparities caused by Covid, we spoke to James Ford.

In 2014, he was named North Carolina's Teacher of the Year. And in 2019, he co-founded CREED, the Center for Racial Equity in Education. He also serves on the North Carolina State Board of Education representing the Southwest region, home to Union County, where Katelynn Laws did her reporting.

James, thanks so much for being here.

James Ford: Thank you for having me, the pleasure's mine.

Mia: So you've been in the classroom as a teacher, you've been outside of it more recently in an advocacy role. I'd love to know, from what you've seen and observed, how has the pandemic affected students, and particularly students of color, in North Carolina?

James: Yeah, I will tell you it's been hard to determine. And some of the scariest moments were in the very beginning of the pandemic, in February and March, when, you know, as a state board member, all of the schools in the Southwest region were contacting us saying "we don't know what to do, provide us direction. We don't even have testing kits, we don't-" you know, it was frightening.

And the decisions we were making, we were wondering how's this going to impact kids? Particularly those who already were ill-served by the system. We knew it was just going to exacerbate it. Whatever gaps were pre-existing, whatever conditions were pre-existing this was just going to make it worse. And I think that was the case in general.

But, you know, we at CREED, putting on my CREED hat, you know, we did some surveying of parents and community members during that time. Online we were offering surveys and asking them what was their experience? And we disaggregated, you know, through the racial groups.

And what we were finding is that, whereas parents and community members thought that schools were trying to attend to their student's needs, particularly in remote learning, and that they had an eye towards equity, that they weren't properly resourced to really respond to those needs. And that they felt there was a need for more training for teachers, the biases, the more affordable tutoring, better access to WiFi, support for parents to even get their kids online. Like, we're talking about digital literacy. And if you map on top of that language barriers, right? The linguistic diversity that exists within students. Or if you map on top of that, students with special needs, right?

And being a student of color, whatever equity issues, again, that were pre-existing, are only going to get worse.

Mia: What were some of the things that y'all heard from immigrant parents in particular - immigrant households that were going through the remote learning situation?

James: You know, for a lot of, you know, mixed-status households or whatever, there's a huge resistance to even wanting to interface, right? So when there's students- well, schools wanting to take a count and figure out where their students are, do you really want to interface with the state like that, right? Because the distrust from, you know, previous administrations, but frankly this one as well, if we're going to be honest, and around, like,

deportations and, you know, like ICE raids, there's just a stunning lack of trust there that I think all impeded, you know, families of color and perhaps immigrant families as well. So those are just a couple of themes that we heard from our surveys and conversations and focus groups.

Mia: So, in April of this year, you gave remarks at the State Board of Education about, sort of, the pointlessness of grades or GPAs for students at this time. You said that as adults we don't get graded, right. We just get performance evaluations at our jobs sometimes, not even in every job.

But I wanted to follow up on that and ask you, is what you think could be done for students in lieu of grades? Or how serious are you talking about this approach to grading in the pandemic? And in the foreseeable future?

James: You know, I thought that we had a real opportunity to seize the reins and really change the direction of education in that moment. And so, that's why I lifted those comments. Because those would've seemed wild and, like, un-tame. But here we are, and you're talking about possibly administering grades. And we don't even know where all of our kids are, or we don't even know whether they have access, or how engaged they are going through a collective trauma like a global pandemic.

I hope that we can get to a place where we really focus on mastery, right? Mastery of concepts, mastery of standards and objectives. Because, like I said, nobody outside of-sort of the academic-industrial complex walks around talking about their grades. They just don't. It's about what you know, how you can apply that learning. And the primitive way that we structure school and evaluate it has to be done away with.

The problem with that is you would just disrupt the entire college application apparatus. But if you noticed that, in the moment, you had colleges that were forced to adjust. They were forced to say, "you know what? We're not going to pay attention to GPAs or we're not going to take into account ACT scores" or whatever because they had to out of necessity.

Now we could do that. And this is what Covid exposed. There were so many things we were told, "we can't do that, we can't do that." Until we had to.

Mia: What are your biggest worries? What are your biggest fears about this coming school year?

James: Oh, man. So, transparently, I'm worried about the kids, more than I even was during 2020. Because we know so much more about the virus and how it operates. And the danger of the variants.

You know, thank God for a vaccine. But when you start talking about the unvaccinated, you know, I have twins, right, that are under twelve. The prospect of there being kids going back to school, without a mask mandate, with a variant out there that is, you know, much more communicable and much more dangerous, frightens me.

And so who are going to be the kids who don't have access to healthcare? Who don't have the same resources? Whose parents can't take off, right? Whose parents were the frontline workers, right, as we refer to them? It's going to be us, it's going to be folks of color.

And that disturbs me, once again, because no matter what, and this is how systemic racism operates, whether you keep your kids home or send them to school, it's the same populations who end up suffering.

Mia: I mean, do you see masks mandates on the rise in these counties? Or do you think that politicization of masks, at this point, has made that, like, a no-go?

James: I think that the politicization of masks has made it a no-go. I mean the governor provided guidance last time. Now we're in a situation where we're leaving it up on good faith, on folks who have not demonstrated good faith or trust or belief in science to determine whether or not folks wear masks. And it's just- I'm going to be transparent. It's unfathomable for me.

And, you know, whether we're talking about wearing masks that prevent the potential spread of a pandemic, or whether we're talking about teaching coursework that incorporates the perspectives of historically marginalized groups, the mentality is the same. It's an unwillingness to consider your fellow citizen. You know, your neighbor.

It's an unwillingness to take into account their wellbeing, their outlook, their perspective. And to focus centrally on one's self, even if it endangers them. Even if it robs them of opportunity. And if we're being for real, like, that's the issue. It's a heart issue that we're going to have to deal with as a country. Because that mentality is, you know, there's no vaccine for that.

Mia: Last year, at the beginning of the pandemic, you wrote about the idea that schools owe students of color an educational debt, and that's a term originally coined by Gloria Ladson Billings. Can you unpack this idea of educational debt for us?

James: Yeah, so, you know, we talk about gaps a lot. I'm guilty of this as well. Opportunity gaps, formerly, achievement gaps. And Gloria Ladson Billings had a different take on that. She said these aren't just gaps. These are debts. Like, these are payments that are owed to kids of color. It's not just that they're not achieving. You have been depriving them, right. You owe them.

Mia: Tell me, how does the pandemic tie into this idea of pre-existing educational debt?

James: You know, disease and infection has been used to wipe people out. So now I'm talking about Native people, right. Germ, disease, and warfare, it's part of the history of this nation. So, really specifically, there's a history here. And there's a history for the mentality of "I can go spread disease wherever I want to and you can't stop me!" Like if we're being honest, that's a pathology, that's a mentality that we haven't really reconciled.

But, I think that it's just another notch- another notch in the belt of a country that has yet to live up to its ideals. And let's be clear, we're not offering White kids a primo education either. This is the thing. Like, when this many members of your body are sick or not functioning properly, the whole body ain't doing well either. So you can't really claim to have a superior education system, a world-class education system.

Then the pandemic, I think, relates to that conversation because it's further robbing us by politicizing the delivery of something so essential as education. And it just sets us up to really set us back.

Mia: There's been a lot of talk about students falling behind, students falling behind, and you mentioned this earlier, kind of, the contentiousness around this idea of learning loss, you

know, amongst communities of kids that have already been experiencing learning loss because of inequity that already existed.

Can you tell us, why is it so important, though, to catch students up this upcoming year? What is at stake if they don't catch up?

James: I'mma try to make it as practical as possible. You know, you have to think about if somebody doesn't have the requisite skills to adjust in a rapidly changing economy, right. You hear people talk about the innovations that happen, and the jobs that will exist in the future don't exist right now.

So then what we really need to be teaching is, like, adaptability, like, hard and soft skills, problem-solving, critical thinking. And if you're already behind in some of the fundamental skill sets, and then you get pushed further behind, it's hard to understand how one could sustain a living for themselves. How they can raise a family. How they can be in communities where there aren't rampant social problems due to the lack of resources that are really rooted in those problems. It leads to social dysfunction, right? The impetus, or the cause of which is really a fundamental lack of access further upstream, further long ago that was never really attended to.

Mia: And to your point, you know, we keep hearing this refrain about going back to normal. But you have shown with your work that normal, or the status quo, right, isn't necessarily what we should be striving towards, right?

So, instead of going back to normal, where would you like to see us go when it comes to education in North Carolina?

James: I envision an education system where every child in North Carolina, no matter what their needs are, no matter what their learning style, what their level of ability, racial, ethnic background, linguistic mother tongue - all this stuff - experiences the education system as one that centers and responds to their identity, their needs, their reality, that focuses more on their holistic development and embodiment and demonstration of certain skills and competencies rather than a letter grade.

That takes pride in adopting justice, and fairness, and equity as a core value of education. And where young people come away after 12 years of experiencing it and say, "you know what? This really prepared me to not just experience the world. But to change the world." That's my dream. That's my radical imagination.

Mia: James, thank you so much for being here today. It's been such a pleasure talking with you and learning from you.

James: Hey, once again, the pleasure is mine. Thank you so much.

Mia: When we come back, we'll talk with a member of the North Carolina state legislature who's an advocate for Latino students. Stay with us.

Ad Break

Mia: I'm Mia Warren, and this is *A Better Life?*

According to the Pew Research Center, 76% of Latino parents with a K-12 student said they're concerned their child has fallen behind because of disruptions caused by Covid. But navigating classes on Zoom wasn't the only problem for some students.

Last year at Monroe High, Victor, a junior at the time, was already struggling with online classes. But things only got more difficult.

> Victor: I tried to make an effort most of the time, but it's like other things at home. Like my parents. My mom had gotten Covid.

Mia: After his mom got Covid, she had to stop working for a while, which meant their family lost a vital source of income. So Victor stopped going to school and started working to help his family pay the bills.

> Victor: Cause, like, in Hispanic households, it's like that. It's harder for us here.

Mia: Ricky Hurtado heads an organization that supports Latino students and immigrant families striving for higher education. He's the Co-Founder and Director of Advancement for LatinxEd.

Ricky's also a member of the North Carolina House of Representatives, from District 63 in Alamance County. That's about an hour west of Raleigh, the state capital.

Ricky, thanks so much for being here.

Ricky Hurtado: It's great to be here with y'all, excited for this conversation.

Mia: So I think before we talk about the pandemic, I just want to acknowledge that a lot of the issues we may be talking about in regards to education were already issues before the pandemic. Like in many areas of our lives, Covid has really exacerbated a lot of these social inequities and made them more visible.

So, what are the kinds of challenges that you've researched or learned about that Latinx students in North Carolina have faced historically?

Ricky: Yeah, so when you think about issues that already existed, you think about some of the challenges that so many of our parents face in the pandemic, such as lack of protection in workplace environments.

We have many of the students that we work with, their parents work at, you know, the local tortilla plant or poultry plants, that really were challenged in terms of how they protected their workers and maintained their doors open during the pandemic. You think about who's at the front lines of the construction industry, agricultural industry, and even the food industry in North Carolina. Like, it's the Latino community that literally feeds the state and the nation in many ways, right.

So, when we have such a big health and financial hit to our families, especially in the beginning of this pandemic, it really rocked everybody's world in ways that were not felt so acutely in other parts of our community. I remember there was (sic) points where the only people that I knew that had Covid-19 were Latino parents and Latino families in Alamance County and other parts of the state. Because it was early on in the pandemic where a lot of us had the luxury of staying home, but in many ways, they did not. And continue to serve on the front lines of this pandemic.

And so it's important to understand that context. Because without that context, it's hard to understand just what that means for their kids when they're in school now. And this is the part where I'm nervous, where folks [are] just wanting to get things back to quote-unquote normal, whatever that means. But we also see that there's a lot that we need to unpack when it comes to the outsize impact that this continues to have on the Latino community.

Mia: What are some of the problems that Latinx students more generally have been facing during Covid?

You've mentioned some of them, working parents who are on the front lines, in rural communities, parents that may be working at chicken plants. What are some of the other challenges that we may not think about immediately? And how do those challenges trickle down into what the learning experience is like for students?

Ricky: North Carolina is not equipped right now in our public schools to deal with the mental health crisis that is currently happening among our students, especially among Latinx students who are seeing their families disproportionately impacted by Covid-19.

We're having to have all these really difficult conversations around parents getting sick, many students losing loved ones, both here and abroad, not being able to visit them. There's a lot of heavy stuff happening in our community that a lot of us have just internalized. My family's lost people in our family to Covid-19. And I know that that's certainly the case for many, many families here in Alamance county as well, and across the state.

It's really the stress that is landing so heavily on so many of our students. That for me is a big, big issue that we don't talk enough about. Because, sure, people highlight it, but then we don't have enough counselors. We don't have enough social workers. We don't have enough resources within our schools to actually deal with the challenge.

Mia: Where does the responsibility lie when it comes to helping students post-Covid? Are we talking parents, teachers, school administrators? How can we be looking to schools for leadership in this particular time?

Ricky: I would say, in many ways, that our school systems are failing the stress test, not by simple fault of their own. It's written in our constitution that it is our duty to provide this education to every child in North Carolina. And so the courts right now, have actually found that North Carolina is not doing their constitutional duty to provide this high-quality education to every child. And the legislature is currently fighting it.

Obviously, not everyone in the legislature, including myself, agrees with us putting up opposition to funding some of these needs. But I think it's a really important part of this conversation around Covid-19. Because if we need strong infrastructure for our schools to do an effective job in our community, for them to be able to have the resources to serve as a frontline response to the pandemic, and everyone's mental health and academic needs, then we have to make sure that we're doing our part to make sure that they have what they need to be successful.

Mia: So when it comes to Latinx students in North Carolina, in your opinion and based on the work that you've done, how can we all rethink the way that we approach education for these students?

Ricky: I think we have to shift from this mindset of an emerging community to a community that's already arrived. We've been talking about an emerging demographic in North Carolina for 30 years now, since I've been in elementary school. And we- folks love to write the stories about, you know, the Latino wave and the emerging demographic.

But I think it's actually pretty damaging because it continues to perpetuate a narrative that we're new to these communities, and that, you know, we can't move beyond the conversation around language access. And that's an important conversation to have for our Spanish speakers. But, at this point, many of the needs go much deeper than that, and really a conversation around integration into our school and communities.

I just visited a middle school, not too long ago, a few weeks ago, and here locally in Alamance, and it is 63% Latino. And the high school next door is 50% Latino. And so, it's just- our schools in many places in North Carolina are getting to the point where they're majority Latino. And I'm afraid of what that means for the future if we don't really begin to reimagine what our school systems can be for an increasingly diverse community in many parts of North Carolina.

Mia: Ricky. Thank you so much for sharing your insights with us today. We really appreciate you being here.

Ricky: Yeah, of course. I mean, this conversation is as important as it's ever been. So happy to be a part of this conversation today.

Mia: Now let's bring back producer Katelynn Laws.

Katelynn, you visited Monroe High School in Monroe, North Carolina, and you produced both of the longer interviews on this podcast. What's your takeaway from all of the reporting you've done?

Katelynn: Ultimately, schools are just a smaller representation of the larger communities they exist within. If we aren't doing right by the students in our schools, it's hard to even say we're sufficiently supporting the community beyond it.

At the end of the day, our lives extend well beyond the classroom. So, supporting our Latino students doesn't just mean getting them good grades or protecting them from Covid. It means actually putting in the work to support the families they're part of, and the adults they'll eventually be.

Mia: Thanks, Katelynn.

Katelynn: You're welcome.

Mia: Katelynn Laws produced this episode.

Quincy Surasmith is *A Better Life?* 's executive producer. Jocelyn Gonzales is our technical director. Our editor is John Rudolph. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing. Our theme music and original score are by Fareed Sajan.

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Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

To hear other episodes in this series, or to read more about the story you just heard, visit us at abetterlifepodcast.com.

I'm Mia Warren. Thanks for listening.

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