Learnings from the Pandemic: Opportunities to Build Better Schools

A look at the challenges and opportunities that system leaders are facing and what success might look like over the next few years

About This Document: This paper summarizes findings from a meeting and individual interviews with Carnegie Corporation of New York grantees conducted in October 2021. As educators are grappling with how to build better schools in the 2021–2022 school year and how to spend an unprecedented influx of federal funding to help them do so, this paper focuses on the challenges and opportunities that system leaders face and what success might look like over the next few years.

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In 2020, Carnegie Corporation of New York invited a cohort of grantees working closely with districts and charter management organizations to meet periodically to share insights about how systems were responding to schooling disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to each meeting, grantees participated in short, individual interviews to help frame the discussion. This paper is based on the most recent set of interviews and meeting conducted in October 2021.

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A Time of Uncertainty

Those interviewed generally described the mood among educators as reflecting the national fatigue with the pandemic. "Everyone's exhausted," said many.

On the one hand, most students and educators have finally returned to in-person learning — a reason for optimism and celebration. On the other hand, confusion and controversy over masking and quarantine policies, political fights over addressing racism and inequity in schools, and staff turnover and capacity challenges at all levels of the system make it hard for leaders to see beyond tomorrow.

"There are so many distractions to take focus away from what we're doing to support learning and social-emotional recovery and development," said one person.

"I think that schools and systems really underestimated the challenge of returning this fall," said another. "That realm of magical thinking meant people thought the challenges they were going to be facing were very different."

"There's so much uncertainty," said a third, "so there's a lot of contingency planning going on. The 'new normal' is not the new normal that they expected."

Many school systems, for example, had not made plans to offer virtual or remote learning to students who tested positive for COVID and needed to be quarantined. Some severely limited remote learning options, making it difficult to serve quarantined students.

Though districts and charter management organizations everywhere are grappling with uncertainty, educators' morale varies, grantees said, depending on the relationships between superintendents and their school boards, state politics and policies regarding COVID and anti-racism in education, and whether school systems were high functioning before the pandemic.

One person said, "This year, I suspect we'll see an even sharper divide between districts that have managed to keep themselves reasonably connected to their communities and pointed in the same direction and those so caught in crisis mitigation and unprecedented levels of political quagmire that there's not a lot of focus on the quality of learning."

Others saw forward momentum. "I wonder if a fuller view of the story right now would include headlines like 'Students are showing up to school eager to learn,'" wrote Emily Freitag in an October 2021 blog post

for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “When I look past the headlines, I do find reasons for hope and signs of progress across states and communities on actions that we know make a difference for student learning and equity.”

ESSER Spending

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and Education Resource Strategies have been tracking districts’ plans for spending federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. In July 2021, Education First produced a report for the Council of Chief State School Officers that analyzed 35 state plans for spending federal relief dollars. The Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University also has been analyzing state ESSER plans. Both states and districts have broad discretion over how to use the funds.

State agencies, pressured to produce plans quickly for the U.S. Department of Education, generally submitted broad overviews of their strategies rather than detailed, comprehensive plans. Four big themes emerged from the Education First analysis: addressing unfinished learning, including through summer school, after-school, and tutoring programs; promoting student mental health, well-being, and connectedness; building educator capacity, including via educator pipelines and professional development; and using data and planning for financial sustainability. Most state plans included strategies that had gained traction prior to the pandemic.

Similarly, most districts submitted only broad outlines of their plans, and many have yet to submit plans for the next round of funding. Districts’ near-term spending has largely focused on short-term needs, such as fans, ventilation, and personal protective equipment to ensure the safety of students and staff; mental health professionals, counselors, and other supports for students’ social and emotional well-being; students’ access to technology; tutoring, summer, and after-school programming; and teacher recognition bonuses. Funding has also been used to hold schools harmless from fluctuating enrollment trends and plug budget shortfalls.

Those interviewed worried that many districts were not thinking about their ESSER money as part of an integrated strategy that would enable them to invest now while building toward longer term goals. “There is a real need for districts to get support in seeing what the universe of possibilities could be that is relevant and in making the right short-term investments,” said one participant.

Many said districts are hesitant to do anything big and bold because of concerns about sustainability, staffing shortages, pushback from stakeholders, or fears that they’ll be ousted if their innovations don’t work out. Determining how to effectively spend the huge amount of money flowing into districts requires leaders to use a muscle they’ve never flexed before. Even among states with promising strategies, “there’s still work to be done to help them maximize those plans,” said one.

Because states and districts have until September 2024 to obligate their federal dollars, many participants viewed the 2022–23 school year as a make-or-break year for systems to move beyond short-term thinking to more transformative changes in teaching and learning. “We will not see this level of federal dollars again,” said a participant.

CRPE, the Collaborative for Student Success, and the Edunomics Lab are launching a hub to compile state and district data about ESSER spending. "I think for a while, we're going to have to piece together a lot of different research to form a coherent picture," said Robin Lake, the director of CRPE.

Addressing Student and Staff Well-Being

The pandemic has heightened concern for students' and educators' overall well-being. It's also led to a broader recognition of how supportive relationships contribute to students' academic and life outcomes, an insight supported by a growing body of research on the science of learning and development. "This is a basic human need that's universal," said one participant. "It has to be continuously integrated into the teaching and learning experience."

Yet many noted that while school districts and charter management organizations acknowledge the importance of relationship building and student and educator well-being to the learning process, they have yet to establish sustainable structures to support these aspects of students' development.

To promote student well-being, some charter schools redesigned the first 30 days of instruction during the 2020–21 school year to focus more on social-emotional learning. For example, they allocated more time for advisory groups (small support groups of students and a teacher or other adult), created gender-specific advisory groups, and worked with community groups to offer extracurricular activities and address students' health and mental health needs.

Many school systems are using student, parent, and staff surveys to better understand how students and educators perceive the school environment and address issues of student engagement. "That feels like a really great thing that there's much more attention to on a systemic level," said one person.

Many systems also are planning to hire more counselors or social workers using ESSER dollars, at least temporarily. Several people praised Cleveland Public Schools' investment in wraparound services to address students' and families' educational, physical, social, and emotional needs and the district's focus on social-emotional learning for adults as well as students. A nationally representative survey of more than 1,000 teachers and administrators, released in December by the Christensen Institute, found that 8 in 10 teachers report their students are behind academically compared to a typical pre-pandemic year, with student absenteeism, supporting students' increased social-emotional challenges, and holding students accountable for completing schoolwork as the top three challenges.

But while systems are taking some steps to address student well-being, participants said they are seeing less activity to support school staff. The Learning Accelerator is working on a set of studies across districts, starting with the Lindsay Unified School District in California, to assess adult well-being in schools and identify ways to address it. "Adult well-being remains a real challenge," said Beth Rabbitt, the organization's chief executive officer. "We're seeing a lot of focus on advocating for teachers to engage in acts of self-care, but districts are not taking on their collective care and well-being." This is particularly true when it comes to nonteaching staff, she said.

Many of the states and districts that belong to Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of state and district leaders, are partnering with the Pure Edge Foundation, which provides a range of open educational resources and professional development options to support staff self-care, as well as a health and wellness curriculum for grades K–12. NewSchools Venture Fund typically recommends Teaching Well as a partner to provide personalized professional development to help teachers build mindfulness, self-care, and resilience.

"Leaders know they have to worry about adults, children, and families, for that matter, but what's missing for a lot of system leaders is the granular, 'How do I get this done?'" said one participant. "There's an emerging understanding that this can't be a class we add around well-being. It needs to be integrated. But the how is still elusive for a lot of people. We, as a sector, have got to begin to provide concrete solutions."

Accelerated Learning

Addressing unfinished learning due to COVID-related school disruptions is a priority for system leaders, those interviewed said, including through investments in tutoring and other interventions to provide individual support for students.

Yet many questioned whether systems would be able to implement their plans as intended, given staffing shortages and other challenges, and whether those plans are research-based. Though the message to accelerate learning by focusing on grade-level content rather than reteaching everything that students might have missed seems to be penetrating, how that's playing out in classrooms remains unclear.

"We're concerned that there are no big, rigorous studies going on," said one person, who expressed particular concern about the dearth of research-based, high-dosage tutoring and the poor understanding of specialized interventions for students with disabilities.

"We're seeing a lot of purchasing of tutoring," said another. "The challenge is how to get people to integrate targeted interventions and tutoring into core instruction. We have models for doing that, but we're just not leveraging them."

While school systems are investing in interventions such as Read 180 and Math 180, said another, "These are plugs in the dike. There are a lot of extensions that are not connected to the core, so you wonder if this is a Band-Aid."

One site that educators are watching closely is Ector County, Texas, which has signed outcomes-based contracts with six online tutoring organizations to provide high-dosage tutoring to its students with payment tied to the academic growth of the students served.

The range of student needs poses a challenge in accelerating learning. A Learning Accelerator study of unfinished learning patterns in the Lindsay Unified School District found that elementary school students and those with special needs fared worse than others during remote instruction. Students in grades K–8 who participated in learning pods (small student groups to support online learning) or returned to in-person instruction early in the pandemic had growth rates far above the national average, and some high schoolers saw their growth rates improve because virtual learning enabled them to balance schooling with

other responsibilities. “This really does argue for taking a student-centered point of view around unfinished learning,” said Rabbitt.

Some districts and charter management organizations are using a high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum as the spine to connect core instruction with additional supports. The District of Columbia Public Schools, for example, provides weekly professional development for teachers to become expert at implementing the district’s curriculum, led by content experts at their schools. This year, those school-based team meetings are focused on helping teachers analyze the foundational skills from the prior year that students might have glossed over and address them using subject-specific strategies. Chicago Public Schools is rolling out a new instructional learning platform that, for the first time, will include both the district’s core curriculum and its intervention curricula. This will enable educators to look across what’s happening in the classroom during core instruction and what needs to happen in intervention groups. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, a subset of school leaders is using a modified version of classroom walkthroughs to observe whether pervasive remediation — versus acceleration — is happening. And in New York City, Teaching Lab is training tutors to use Eureka and EngageNY, two highly rated math curricula, so they can partner with teachers who are using those curricula in their classrooms. “We’ve yet to see the fruit of that, but I think it contributes to instructional coherence,” said Sarah Johnson, Teaching Lab’s chief executive officer. Some charter schools also are using rapid cycles of formative assessment to adjust instruction, rather than waiting for end-of-year state tests and eliminating nonessential assessments.

Most agreed that school and system leaders are still looking for strategies on how best to accelerate learning. They worried that too strong a focus on technical solutions could cause systems to overlook students’ immediate need to be reconnected, reinspired, and remotivated, which will also influence learning outcomes.

Addressing Race and Equity in Schools

The pandemic and the concurrent push for social justice have highlighted longstanding disparities in education and society by race and class. In response, many districts and charter management organizations have begun to focus more explicitly on addressing and teaching about racism and other forms of inequity in schools. Yet political attacks on critical race theory and state legislation seeking to ban educators from talking about issues of race and inequality have threatened to derail systems’ efforts to become more equitable and responsive to their students.

Those interviewed said that the nonprofit organizations, districts, and charter school management organizations they work with remain committed to confronting issues of race and inequality. “I don’t know any of our peers or partners who aren’t talking about the role of race in instruction,” said one person.

“It’s admirable how districts have maintained this commitment,” said another, pointing to Chicago, Denver, the District of Columbia, and San Antonio, among others. “The districts that we’re leading were thinking about culturally responsive practices before the summer of 2020 and used 2020 as an inflection point to energize that work and invest even more deeply.”

Detroit Public Schools, for example, is using the My Perspectives high school curriculum and adapting it to help students see their culture and identity reflected in the classroom. Oakland, California, is

leveraging the EL Education curriculum to train educators on culturally responsive practices. The District of Columbia Public Schools has a voluntary but well-attended anti-racist educator university.

"We've seen a huge uptake in integrating culturally responsive and sustaining practices into curriculum-based learning," said Johnson of Teaching Lab, whose organization recently published a guide on what they're learning. "We find that in most places, people are not just receptive; they're demanding it."

But leaders navigating an increasingly complex political context must be careful when it comes to the language they use. Experts suggested engaging communities in the conversation to address local concerns and contexts and steering free of education jargon.

"Even the letters SEL [social-emotional learning] are being co-opted as critical race theory," said one person. "So, I'm seeing places that are carefully walking into this, places where they're avoiding the expression 'equity' at all costs, and places where the work continues. It's really a mishmash across the United States."

Participants predicted that the politics would only get worse in the lead-up to the next presidential election.

Family and Community Engagement

Remote and hybrid learning — and families' overwhelming food, financial, and housing needs during the pandemic — forced district and school leaders to pay more attention to the critical role of families and communities in children's education. But as schools reopened for in-person learning in fall 2021, participants feared a bounce-back to business as usual. "A lot of our districts have done a much better job engaging with families over the period of the pandemic than they did before," said one participant. "How do we build on that?"

"It's definitely part of the rhetoric," said another. "My dream was that districts and schools would figure out ways of allocating more teacher and school time to connecting with parents — that they would structure schedules and create expectations around the kinds of engagement needed with families to capitalize on the virtual communication that was happening [during COVID]. At least in the districts we're in, I'm not seeing that systematic approach."

While some school systems are creating new roles to help prioritize parent and community engagement and student voice, districts aren't necessarily prepared to act on those perspectives, said another observer, "especially if it's going to significantly push their thinking." Failing to act on families' input could further erode parents' trust.

Yet the broadening recognition that family engagement matters could provide an opening for parent advocacy groups. For example, the Oakland Unified School District is partnering with the parent-led Oakland REACH to design a new school and to support the work of parent advocates. Los Angeles Unified School District has asked the nonprofit Springboard Collaborative to work with its elementary schools on a family-centered tutoring initiative. The governor of Arizona awarded the Black Mothers Forum more than $3 million to launch 50 Black-led micro-schools across the state, in addition to the 11 that already

exist. “We’re excited about the possibilities of what solid parent advocacy organizations can do during this moment and what they’re demanding,” said Miho Kubagawa, a partner at NewSchools Venture Fund.

Similarly, the large influx of ESSER funding could provide opportunities for systems to partner more closely with their communities and invest in community-based nonprofits that parents trust, such as Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the YMCA, church groups, and club sports organizations. “Giving money to community groups could be a tangible investment in changing those relationships going forward,” said one person.

Participants also noted the key roles that intermediaries and local government officials can play in coordinating the work of schools with community-based groups. In Indianapolis, for example, the Mind Trust has taken the lead on sourcing and organizing outside partners to work with the district.

Others cautioned that cross-sector collaboration takes time and trust to build. Districts searching for the most efficient and reliable solutions during a crisis are likely to rely on their own staff. The Christensen Institute’s most recent survey, for example, asked school administrators whether their districts offered learning hubs during the 2020–21 school year. Learning hubs offer both academic and social-emotional support for small groups of students to help with distance learning. Most did not, and those that did were staffing them in-house rather than partnering with outside organizations. The same was true for virtual schools.

Despite the challenges in forging school-community partnerships, one participant hoped that three years from now, “we’re not talking anymore about how schools alone can fix and meet all the challenges facing young people in our society, but we’ve used our perch in schools to broaden the conversation and bring whole communities around the table to solve problems of youth development.”

Human Capital Challenges

As leaders contemplate how to invest in their systems’ short- and long-term needs, people-talent challenges loom large, from shortages in noncertified staff, such as bus drivers and substitute teachers, to turnover and fatigue among superintendents and their teams.

Many participants worried that the recent surge in workers leaving their jobs, dubbed the “Great Resignation,” is affecting the education sector. One participant highlighted the role gender equity may be playing in turnover and talent shortages in education. “The private sector is responding to the pay equity issues faster than school boards are. So, if I’m a woman with a master’s degree in math, why am I going to teach middle school for $40,000 a year?”

Though many districts are using their ESSER dollars to try to address human capital challenges — for example, by offering teacher bonuses or creating new teacher pipelines to diversify their workforce — they have yet to dramatically rethink the teaching role to make it more attractive and set teachers up for success.

Systems Support

Given the demands on school systems this year, a number of organizations are stepping up efforts to connect district and charter leaders with each other and outside experts to strategically address the issues they're facing. The Learning Accelerator, for example, plans to launch a national network of schools and districts to explore how to use virtual and hybrid structures to open up more flexible learning opportunities for students beyond the pandemic. Next Generation Learning Challenges, with the support of Carnegie Corporation of New York, is launching the Thrive Network to support leaders working on system redesign. EducationFirst has published a guide to help leaders develop more coherent and equitable school systems. Through its various networks, Education Resource Strategies is supporting 71 districts to develop more strategic plans for how they use people, time, and resources, including offering ideas about where to start to build toward long-term change.

Given the ongoing and emerging challenges system leaders are facing, participants also said they're spending more time coaching them through sticky problems and immediate exigencies. "I think a lot of it is meeting educators and district leaders right where they are," said one person, "and addressing the fires while tending the garden." Effective leaders and support organizations need to do both in order to keep avenues open to deep, long-term change.

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