



Looking Ahead: How Systems Can Support Students Post-COVID

Recommendations for how districts and charter networks can effectively use federal stimulus money to address immediate needs and promote long-term change

About This Document: This paper summarizes findings from individual interviews with experts and a March 2021 virtual meeting of Carnegie Corporation of New York grantees focused on how districts and charter networks can effectively use federal stimulus money to support students over the next few years. It builds on a November 2020 Carnegie Corporation of New York [paper](#) about the core capacities that enabled some systems to make a relatively smooth transition to remote teaching and learning, particularly for low-income students and students of color. While the recommendations offered here are based on observations from the field rather than rigorous empirical research, they nonetheless offer useful hypotheses about how districts and charter networks might capitalize on emerging lessons from the pandemic to address immediate needs and promote long-term change.

A Vision Paper From



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America's schools are at a historic crossroads. The shuttering of school buildings nationally in response to COVID-19 has served as a forceful reminder of the importance of schools as an essential public good. At the same time, both the pandemic and the national movement for racial justice have spotlighted deep, longstanding inequities in our education system and society more broadly. As schools across the country reopen, billions of dollars in federal COVID-19 relief funding are providing an unprecedented opportunity for them to build back better, particularly for students historically underserved by public education.

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Tensions and Opportunities

The American Rescue Plan provides \$123 billion for K–12 state education agencies, with \$110 billion allocated to districts through the federal Title I formula with few limitations or prescriptions for usage.² For local school systems, it offers an unprecedented, one-time influx of money — roughly 25 percent of an average district's operating budget, or seven times the typical Title I allocation in a given year — that must be spent over three years. Districts and charter networks that want to use these funds to both address immediate needs and promote long-term systemic change must navigate several tensions.

Balancing Urgency with Intentionality

While there is pressure to spend funds quickly, districts and charter networks also need to spend them strategically, aligning their expenditures with a clear vision and theory of action for improving student learning. One expert we spoke with highlighted the need for districts to consider their goals carefully before making investments: “We need to create space for conversations about what we value and what we want to head toward so the urgency doesn't just force districts into 10 new contracts with providers that get layered on top of a system that wasn't producing great results for most kids, particularly those furthest from opportunity.”

Moving Fast While Engaging the Community

The inequitable impacts of the pandemic and the push for racial justice have created political urgency around the need to advance educational equity. Consequently, one expert told us, “If you want to build buy-in from communities that have lost trust in school systems, you might need to act now and do things that communities have been demanding for a long time.”

¹ Lynn Olson, *Decision-Making amid Uncertainty: District Responses to COVID and Systemic Racism* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2020), <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/decision-making-amid-uncertainty-district-responses-covid-and-systemic-racism/>.

² Chris Duncombe, “The American Rescue Plan: What's in It for K-12 Schools?,” *EdNote* (blog), Education Commission of the States, March 11, 2021, <https://ednote.ecs.org/the-american-rescue-plan-whats-in-it-for-k-12-schools/>.

At the same time, many communities and families have expressed the desire to define success differently than schools did in the past, which will require districts to use more inclusive forms of decision-making. In a national poll released in December 2020 by the National Parents Union, 66 percent of parents said schools should be rethinking how to educate students as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.³ District and charter leaders need time and processes to engage with their communities around their needs, priorities, and vision for public schools.

Addressing Education Recovery and Redesign

Several people we spoke with expressed concerns that the desire for normalcy would encourage a return to the status quo, which was not effective for many students even before the pandemic. “My fear,” said one expert, “is that the moment we’re all ‘okay,’ we’ll snap back to the way things used to be, and we can’t afford that.”

However, the current debate between focusing on education “recovery” versus education “redesign” is not helpful. One expert told us, “Redesign and recovery, I don’t see them as separate. I don’t think we can recover without redesign.”

Another remarked, “The challenge for leaders right now is to hold the dual lens and to keep pushing. School systems need to get students the best of what has worked previously — but at scale — and preserve new innovations that better serve students and families post-pandemic. Those framing conversations need to start now.”

Preserving Hard-Earned Gains While Combating Change Fatigue

In the face of unprecedented challenges, many schools and systems have made some hard-earned gains this past year. Now, they worry about losing traction. “There’s a very real change fatigue that exists in our systems,” said one expert. “People feel desperate to go back to normal.”

Systems will need to prioritize the practices that they want most to sustain post-pandemic. “This is not the moment to say we’re going to leap into the 21st century and change school from everything you’re familiar with,” said one expert. “Rather, let’s preserve and build on the collection of good things that did happen, despite the awfulness.”

The Core Capacities for Adaptation

Carnegie Corporation of New York’s 2020 paper *Decision-Making amid Uncertainty: District Responses to COVID and Systemic Racism* identified seven core capacities that appeared to help school districts and charter networks make a relatively successful pivot to remote instruction in spring 2020, drawing on interviews with 17 experts in the field and a virtual meeting of that group.⁴ A year later, those interviewed said the same core capacities are relevant for this school year, but their order of importance has shifted, with issues like trust and relationship building rising to the top. The list below reflects how those experts would currently rank these capacities in importance.

³ National Parents Union, “New Poll: Parents Worried about whether Kids Are Prepared for Next Grade Level,” May 4, 2021, <https://nationalparentsunion.org/npu-polling/>.

⁴ Olson, *Decision-Making amid Uncertainty*.

Trusting and Collaborative School Cultures

The importance of trusting and collaborative school and system cultures rose to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic — and trust and collaboration remain essential as schools plan to reopen. “The culture and relationship piece, trust between adults in the system, and particularly trust between the district leadership and the teacher union, is a big one,” said one expert. “We’re seeing that play out even more now.”

In general, systems that pivoted relatively well to remote learning either had highly collaborative labor-management relationships or no unions at all. One expert described “sitting with the profound lack of trust between labor and management.” In 2020, experts hypothesized that schools that had built strong, collaborative cultures among educators could confront the adaptive changes posed by the pandemic more effectively. They further hypothesized that networks and other structures for collaboration within and across districts were useful in the face of uncertainty, enabling educators to share their work and engage in joint problem-solving. Those relationships and structures continue to be important this school year, with collaborative planning and learning enabling schools to respond to students’ needs and support educators.⁵

“People are desperately looking for networks to lean on for solutions,” said one expert. “They’re looking for places they trust and can go to for information.”

Strong Relationships with Students and Families

Months of remote learning have underscored that relationships and learning are intertwined.⁶ Schools and school systems that have prioritized maintaining (and even strengthening) bonds between students and teachers and between schools and families have done a better job of keeping students attending class and engaged.

For example, the Nashville school district in Tennessee took the opportunity during the pandemic to ensure that every student has an adult “navigator.”⁷ Navigators work with about six to 12 students weekly to support their overall well-being and troubleshoot individual needs. Roughly half of the district’s staff participate in the program. Student check-ins have enabled schools to identify a wide range of areas of concern, including computer and internet access, academic engagement and success, mental and emotional well-being, and a desire for enrichment activities.

For families, in particular, clear communication from system leaders has been critical. “People understand a lot of responses if they feel like it’s been well thought out and well communicated,” said one expert. Infrequent and inconsistent communication can contribute to feelings of mistrust, particularly among families of color who have experienced inequitable treatment in the past.

⁵ Lynn Olson, *Teaching Innovation: New School Staffing Strategies Inspired by the Pandemic* (Washington, D.C.: FutureEd, 2021), <https://www.future-ed.org/teaching-innovation-new-school-staffing-strategies-inspired-by-the-pandemic/>.

⁶ Linda Darling-Hammond, Lisa Flook, Channa Cook-Harvey, Brigid Barron, and David Osher, “Implications for the Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development,” *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (February 2019): 90–140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>.

⁷ Linda Jacobson, “Nashville’s ‘Navigator’ Tries to Keep Students in Remote Learning from Getting Lost in the System,” *The 74*, December 20, 2020, <https://www.the74million.org/article/nashvilles-navigator-tries-to-keep-students-in-remote-learning-from-getting-lost-in-the-system/>.

Strong Leadership

While strong leadership continues to matter, the importance of flexible, adaptive leadership has become paramount as the pandemic has dragged on and superintendents have sought to lead on issues of racial justice.

“Probably up front, we were talking about their boldness, their decisiveness,” said one expert. “As this thing has weathered on, the kinds of leadership qualities that become a bit more important might be emotional intelligence — the ability to help people process grief and to navigate with perseverance.”

Another expert said, “It was the adaptive leadership that was really crucial, the capacity to re-see things based on current circumstances. I think some leaders were overwhelmed by the scope and weight and complexity of this.”

Leadership styles varied among district leaders, with some moving to centralize decision-making and power at a time of crisis and others distributing leadership responsibilities so that principals and teachers could have more autonomy over scheduling and curricula. One expert we spoke with indicated that the latter approach was more suitable, given the circumstances: “The moment called for more true inclusion of all of these decision-makers.”

Inclusive governance structures included closer partnerships with community-based groups and other government agencies. These partnerships enabled schools to serve the holistic needs of students and families, from food to housing to mental health services — all of which impact learning.

Prior Experience with Technology

Early in the pandemic, experts identified a school system’s prior technology experience as necessary but not sufficient to enable a smooth transition to remote instruction. Since then, it’s become even more apparent that access to technology is not enough. According to a fall 2020 survey by the Clayton Christensen Institute, success in transitioning to remote instruction depended on whether teachers received professional development around the use of technology, felt confident using it, and had confidence in their ability to serve students this school year.⁸

“It’s not just about dropping the box and walking away,” noted one expert, “but making sure there’s a robust set of supports for teachers.”

In one innovative approach, Shelby County Public Schools in Kentucky launched a do-it-yourself video series, enabling teachers to upload five- to 10-minute videos of successful remote learning practices to share with other teachers online.⁹

A Clear Vision

Schools that made a relatively successful transition to remote learning during the pandemic had leaders with a clear vision and the organizational savvy to realign people, time, and resources in a changing

⁸ Thomas Arnett, *Breaking the Mold: How a Global Pandemic Unlocks Innovation in K-12 Instruction* (Boston: Clayton Christensen Institute, 2021), https://www.christenseninstitute.org/publications/online-learning-survey/?_sft_topics=k-12-education

⁹ Shelby County (KY) Public Schools, *Shelby Speaks: The Concurrency of Our Classrooms*, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8T5h5fYTtrdbx2r-mktR7dwB9V1lwBy4>.

environment, rather than just replicating in-person schooling. The ability to execute on a strategic plan grounded in a clear vision of teaching and learning — across different departments and levels of a system — helped generate coherence.

Clarity around Decision-Making, Communications, and Curricula

In 2020, experts identified clarity around decision-making authority, communications, and curricula as three areas that supported a smoother transition to COVID-related school changes. In large systems, in particular, a coherent approach to curricula and to training teachers in online instruction appeared to help ease the transition to remote instruction.

“If systems didn’t have the consistency of decision-making and clarity about who gets to choose curriculum [in 2020], they should be worried about that now,” said one expert.

Surveys and Feedback Loops

Creating feedback loops that enabled systems to learn and adjust based on data also helped systems flex during COVID. While student, parent, and staff surveys and feedback loops to assess implementation on the ground have certainly helped systems learn and adapt throughout the pandemic, experts observed they were most useful in systems that already had a strong culture of data use and schools that engaged in rapid data-inquiry cycles. “The places where things are going better have formative data systems, often curriculum-aligned, that allow teachers to pull up how kids are doing day by day,” said one expert. “That’s not common right now.”

State Context

In addition to a system’s own capacities, experts identified the larger state context as an important influence on the ability of districts and charters to adapt. Throughout this past year, states’ policies and political contexts also have significantly impacted school districts. “The political context and how political leaders have spent political capital — or not — is profound,” said one expert.

In Florida, Rhode Island, and Texas, for example, most schools opened for in-person learning, sometimes over the objection of union leaders. States with a strong history of school choice, such as Arizona and Florida, already had policies and political contexts that supported innovation.

Looking Beyond This School Year

The pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on students and their families. In looking to the future, several experts we interviewed emphasized that education recovery and renewal will take place over a multiyear timeline, not just during this summer or fall.

“I think that the goals we need to be setting are pretty ambitious. We’re going to catch kids back up,” said one expert. “But if we’re going to have goals with that kind of ambition, you have to give yourself a runway to get there.”

Another expressed a similar view: “This is not a summer and fall problem. This is going to be a several-years problem, maybe a decade.”

Given the long road to recovery ahead, experts suggested the following principles for school systems.

Start planning now.

Effective school systems and charter management organizations are not waiting until this summer to assess where students are and make a plan. They’ve already begun shifting their instructional approach to provide the help students need.

“The best places are planning for next year now, and that includes training educators,” said one expert. “If you wait until the summer, you’re too late.”

Henry County in Georgia has provided an early literacy and graduation readiness guarantee to families. Based on students’ needs, it will offer a suite of individualized learning opportunities this summer and fall, from tutoring to online support.¹⁰ Many systems, however, are still fighting fires rather than thinking ahead. Districts continue to be consumed with the logistics of reopening, given concerns about vaccination rates in their community, COVID testing, personal protective equipment supply chains, and the rise of coronavirus variants.

Said one expert, “Our advice is to pull up some of your most adaptive staff and create an advance team that can pull out of the day-to-day and start imagining the future.”

Make changes that meet present needs while looking to the future.

The nonprofit organization Education Resource Strategies has suggested a “do now, build toward” approach to recovery and renewal where districts leverage this moment for transformation. With this approach, districts look to make changes that meet immediate needs while creating opportunities for lasting change, including through system-level structures.

For example, systems might extend core instructional time in a grade or subject and assign nonteaching staff to small-group instruction at specific times of day to provide more individual attention, especially for students with the greatest learning needs. To do this, systems would need to overhaul their master schedules and systematically vary class sizes and time in subject. That type of change could then support a long-term shift toward smaller class sizes in the grades and subjects where student needs are greatest, offset by larger class sizes in other areas.

Creating an intentional space for innovation can help systems address current needs while thinking ahead more creatively. During the past year, districts that already had a culture of innovation and structures to test new practices were able to adapt more successfully. Other school systems should consider setting up research and development structures to support innovation in the long term. School systems might also use virtual schools and learning pods more intentionally as laboratories for innovation.

¹⁰ Henry County Board of Education, *Ensuring Student Learning: Identification and Intervention to Support Student Learning* (McDonough, GA: Henry County Schools, 2021), https://schoolwires.henry.k12.ga.us/cms/lib/GA01000549/Centricity/Domain/5962/Ensuring_Student_Learning_HCS_Jan_2021.pdf.

Prioritize.

Many experts talked about the need for ruthless prioritization. “You can’t do everything; you need to be judicious,” said one.

“We need to go into the next year being really intentional, focused on quality instruction. Less is more,” said another. “If that’s not true for the leadership, we can’t move forward.”

Rebecca Kockler, the former assistant superintendent of academic content for the state of Louisiana, suggests three essential focus areas for summer school that would put students and schools on a better footing this fall:

1. Focus on reading foundations for children in grades K–3, and for students up through grade 6 who are struggling, by assessing where students are in their reading progress, providing a focused curriculum this summer, and then assessing students again at the end of summer and providing that data to schools to make the transition back to school more efficient.
2. Hone in on essential math skills for students in grades K–8. Zearn Math, for example, has prioritized the content students will need to learn this summer so that the next school year is productive and focused on grade-level instruction as much as possible. ANet has also developed a prioritized math standards document.¹¹
3. Conduct individual check-ins with students and families to identify students’ social, emotional, and mental health needs before the start of the school year.

Practice inclusive decision-making.

Though the starting point may differ based on local contexts, it’s important to include students, families, and other community members in conversations about school reopening and renewal. While some communities may want to engage in a broader conversation about their vision for public schools, others may want to tackle specific, concrete problems of inequity. Both are possible pathways to transformation.

“We know that lots of families don’t want to go back to normal fully,” said one expert. “So, how do we balance something that feels like a return but is truly based on what communities define as how they want schools to operate?”

Leaders who do not involve families and communities in these decisions risk damaging relationships, as families who do not see the influx of money benefiting their children could lose faith in their public schools. Ferguson-Florissant School District in Missouri is addressing this concern by working with ANet to build an antiracist change team, composed predominantly of students but also including other members of the district and community, to determine how to move forward from the events of the past year.

¹¹ ANet, *Important Prerequisite Math Standards* (Boston: ANet, 2020), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kpx12hBH8icj8drAaSQG-cuJMS6-Miff/view>.

Focus on the most impacted students.

Systems that moved away from a one-size-fits-all approach to learning during the pandemic have prioritized their most vulnerable student populations and organized around them first, according to NewSchools Venture Fund. Now, the question is what supports they need and how schools can continue to prioritize them this coming school year.¹²

Experts expressed particular concern about students who have been disconnected from formal education this past year. Bellwether Education Partners estimates that as three million children in the United States have been absent from schools — both in-person and virtual — since March 2020.¹³

“It’s striking how many students have gone months without contact with school,” said one expert.

Though many districts have taken steps to close the digital divide, hundreds of thousands of students still lack consistent access to digital devices and the internet.¹⁴

“We need a real plan for students who couldn’t access remote technology, which can be a very large number of students,” said one expert. “We’re going to see huge variability across districts that worked that out and districts that didn’t.”

Look for ways to restore and maintain relationships.

“One of the biggest casualties of [remote instruction] has been relationships, peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher,” said one expert.

Another expert noted that amid the stress of the past year, relationships and morale among teachers and system leaders have also been under strain: “Teachers are going to leave this year holding a lot of their own stress and trauma and have no place to put it and, I think, system leaders too. There might need to be some processing and restoration and connection among adults.”

Even high-performing charter management organizations have reported that they are worried about how unmotivated and unengaged students are. “We need really intentional work around re-engaging kids,” said one expert we interviewed. “People are saying that even when kids are coming back into buildings, it still feels abnormal.”

As schools reopen, systems will need to intentionally create environments that support the social and emotional wellbeing of students and staff and create a sense of belonging. The Center on Reinventing Public Education has described how school districts are addressing social-emotional learning during the pandemic,¹⁵ and the Aspen Institute has provided recommendations for how systems can use school climate data to support students’ social, emotional, and academic success.¹⁶

¹² Heather McManus and Jeff Schulz, “We Helped Two Schools Create Reopening Plans: Here Are Five Lessons. NewSchools Venture Fund: Oakland, CA. 2020, <https://www.newschools.org/blog/we-helped-two-schools-create-reopening-plans%E2%80%8A-%E2%80%8Ahere-are-five-lessons>.

¹³ Hailly T. N. Korman, Bonnie O’Keefe, and Matt Repka, *Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis* (Sudbury, MA: Bellwether Education Partners, 2020), <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis>

¹⁴ Emily Tate, “The Digital Divide Has Narrowed, but 12 Million Students Are Still Disconnected,” *EdSurge*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2021-01-27-the-digital-divide-has-narrowed-but-12-million-students-are-still-disconnected>.

¹⁵ Michael DeArmond, Lisa Chu, and Padma Gundapaneni, *How Are School Districts Addressing Student Social-Emotional Needs during the Pandemic?* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2021), <https://www.crpe.org/publications/how-are-school-districts-addressing-student-social-emotional-needs-during-pandemic>.

¹⁶ Aspen Institute Education and Society Program, *Coming Back to Climate: How Principals Can Use School Climate Data to Lead Improvement* (Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 2020), <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/coming-back-to-climate-how-principals-can-use-school-climate-data-to-lead-improvement/>.

Accelerate, don't remediate.

Addressing lost learning time will require systems to rethink their interventions geared toward catching students up. Rather than trying to cover all missing content, educators should focus on advancing learning in the highest-priority domains so that students can access grade-level learning and continue to move forward while having their social-emotional needs addressed. A recent study by TNTP and Zearn math found that elementary students who receive grade-level content with “just in time” supports — a practice often known as acceleration — struggled less and learned more than students who experienced remediation instead.¹⁷

“The start of the conversation,” said one expert, “shouldn't be, ‘Do we do summer school?’ but ‘What learning do we need to advance?’”

Said another: “As we're exploring strategies for addressing lost learning time, we are seeing a differentiator between districts that are just going to do more of the same and those who are saying this is a different level of problem, so we're going to have to find something that really shifts the boundaries of what's possible. They are few and far between.”

Solutions might entail extending learning time and individual attention for students, especially those with the greatest need, both inside and outside the traditional school day — for example, through intersessions, after-school learning opportunities offered in collaboration with community-based organizations. They might also require greater flexibility in how time is organized and used within schools.

The Education Redesign Lab at Harvard University recommends individualized success planning for every child. As in Nashville, schools might assign each student a navigator who can help develop a plan that connects the student with the academic and social-emotional supports they need to get back on track in school.¹⁸ Research-based strategies identified by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University include high-dosage tutoring and acceleration academies that provide students with intensive instruction in a subject.¹⁹ The school district in Everett, Washington, plans to open a permanent evening school for high school students, many of whom are currently working while continuing their education.

New strategies will require systems to rethink their use of time and human capital. “Everyone is talking about tutoring and staffing next-generation summer school,” observed one expert, “but there's this open question about where are the people going to come from, and do they have the skill set? What is the intersection of human capital and your use of time?”

Though experts pointed to the need for innovations in staffing and scheduling, many said that labor-management contracts and resistance to change often stand in the way. “There is an opportunity for innovative staffing, and I don't see district partners doing that or thinking about that,” said one person.

¹⁷ The New Teacher Project and Zearn, *Accelerate, Don't Remediate: New Evidence from Elementary Math Classrooms*, 2021, <https://ntp.org/publications/view/teacher-training-and-classroom-practice/accelerate-dont-remediate>

¹⁸ Education Redesign Lab, *Getting Kids Back on Track: Supporting Students During the Covid-19 Crisis through Individualized Success Planning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2020), <https://edredesign.org/links/rapid-response-success-planning-guide>.

¹⁹ Annenberg Institute, “Guiding Schools' COVID-19 Recovery Decisions Using Data and Evidence,” Brown University, <https://annenberg.brown.edu/recovery>.

Support teachers' learning.

The past year's experiences have underscored the need for professional development for educators. "The teacher learning curve is extremely high right now," noted one expert.

"I think people always short-shrift teacher professional learning," said another, "and I see it happening now. We want these teachers to do something new and difficult, and then we don't come up with a plan for how they learn how to do those things."

One way to help teachers adapt is to incorporate professional development opportunities into summer activities. For example, summer learning academies for students could also provide high-quality support, development, and feedback for teachers heading into the new school year.

In developing supports for staff, districts must keep in mind that people have experienced a range of stressors over the past year and will have different needs for recovery. Teachers who feel overwhelmed might benefit from reduced teaching loads. Others may actually desire more opportunities for collaboration, leadership, and joint learning. In all cases, districts should remain cognizant of the challenges their staff have endured over the past year. In some districts, demoralization and burnout among teachers and administrators following months of hybrid and remote instruction have led to concerns about staff turnover.²⁰

"We're going to lose so many amazing educators in the next six months," predicted one expert. "We may lose a generation of outstanding teachers. That will permanently damage our profession."

Districts will need to respond by thinking strategically about staffing, diversifying their teacher pipelines, addressing shortages in specific areas, and providing professional development for new staff members this summer. In addition, said one expert, "there's got to be something that inspires and gives educators a sense of possibility and hope and that allows them to process the frustrations of the past year."

Reach beyond the schoolhouse.

Districts and charter management organizations made heroic efforts this past year to address families' food, health, housing, and mental health needs. However, they lack the resources to sustain these supports in the long term. Given the scale of needs — including concerns about trauma, anxiety, and depression among students — schools will have to build systemic partnerships with community-based organizations. Indeed, many districts that pivoted more successfully this past year developed strong community partnerships to respond to issues that schools could not address on their own.

"For the most part, our school systems have all relied on partnerships and unusual new connections to get through this crisis," said one expert. "Those are things that I hope would continue."

The Education Redesign Lab recommends governance structures such as Children's Cabinets at the state and city level to support cross-sector collaboration.²¹ This type of partnership doesn't just benefit schools;

²⁰ In an opinion piece in *Education Week*, Doris A. Santoro drew a distinction between burnout and demoralization, which occurs when teachers' values conflict with their work. See "Teacher Demoralization Isn't the Same as Teacher Burnout," *Education Week*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-teacher-demoralization-isnt-the-same-as-teacher-burnout/2020/11>.

²¹ Education Redesign Lab, "Local Children's Cabinet Network," Harvard University, <https://edredesign.org/local-childrens-cabinet-network>.

community-based partners also are more powerful when they work with schools to push for larger policy changes on behalf of children and families.

“So much of our work needs to happen in a broader ecosystem,” said one expert. “We need to ask more of our community anchors to better support schools, and there needs to be more school-community collaboration.”

Conclusion

The challenge of working toward recovery and redesign in each of the nation’s more than 15,000 districts nationally is daunting. “This can’t be district by district,” said one expert. “It will be game over.”

Another expert observed that “it’s unlikely that system leaders are going to see all the different possibilities that are available over the next three years at this really critical juncture.” Leaders need guidance on what pathways to follow, what questions to ask along the way, and how to build a coalition of district and community leaders to help make critical choices. Toolkits, websites, and resource materials are useful, but they will not be sufficient for the challenge ahead.

Some states are providing strategic assistance for districts to help them plan and learn from each other. Tennessee, for example, is launching a network strategy around reentry for school systems. In Washington State, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has funded Education Resource Strategies and seven technical assistance providers to work with nine school districts in a community of practice focused on resource allocation to support students’ academic and social-emotional well-being, with the goal of producing public goods for the entire state. But whether state education agencies are viewed as a source of support or compliance depends heavily on local context and history.

Experts also wondered how state professional associations, which many smaller districts turn to for support, could play a more proactive role. “It’s the districts least networked right now that need the most help,” said one expert.

As the education community looks to the future, it would benefit from rigorous research on what we have learned this past year, as well as baseline data on students’ current social, emotional, and academic well-being. The lessons from the pandemic discussed in this report may provide a starting point for developing a research agenda around these crucial areas of inquiry.

Additional Resources

ANet

[*The Building Blocks of Virtual Instruction: A Diagnostic Tool*](#)

A toolkit that provides reflection questions and resources to strengthen content and pedagogy during the pandemic.

Aspen Institute

[*Creating Conditions for Student Success: A Policymakers’ School Climate Playbook*](#)

This paper provides school climate strategies and recommendations to guide policymakers in building a comprehensive and coherent statewide approach for improving school climate.

[*Coming Back to Climate: How Principals Use School Climate Data to Lead Improvement*](#)

A toolkit for principals based on the experiences of fellow school leaders who are taking concrete action with climate data.

Bellwether Education Partners

[*From Pandemic to Progress: Eight Education Pathways for COVID-19 Recovery*](#)

Guidance on how the education sector can recenter and rebuild in the wake of COVID-19.

[*American Rescue Plan Act of 2021: Analysis of Funding for Education, Children, and Families*](#)

A summary of education funding in the American Rescue Plan.

Center on Reinventing Public Education

[*School District Responses to COVID-19 Closures*](#)

A national database tracking district responses to COVID-19.

[*Learning Pods*](#)

A database tracking learning pod and hub initiatives across the country.

[*“Public Education Will Never Be the Same”: How COVID-19 Forced School District Leaders to Innovate on the Fly*](#)

This report describes what a representative sample of district leaders say they want to change going forward based on the [*American School District Panel*](#), a national survey developed in collaboration between the Center on Reinventing Public Education, RAND, Chiefs for Change, and Kitamba.

Chiefs for Change

[*Schools and COVID-19*](#)

A microsite explaining how school systems are responding to COVID-19.

Clayton Christensen Institute

[*2020 vs. 2021: Notable Trends in Innovative School Practice Nationwide*](#)

The Canopy project database tracks innovations in school practices across nearly 200 innovative schools across the country.

[*Breaking the Mold: How a Global Pandemic Unlocks Innovation in K–12 Instruction*](#)

The Christensen Institute is conducting a series of nationally representative surveys of teachers and administrators on how instructional practice has changed during the pandemic. This report describes findings from the first survey, which will be repeated in spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022.

Digital Promise

[*Learner Variability Project*](#)

This project helps educators and product developers translate the science of variability in student learning into strategies to improve classroom practice and educational product design, particularly for students who may be uninspired by traditional pathways of teaching and learning.

Education Resource Strategies

[*The Cost of COVID: Understanding the Full Financial Impact of COVID-19 on Districts and Schools.*](#) A piece on the long-term financial impacts of COVID-19 and its implications for education leaders.

[COVID-19 Reopening and Recovery: Toolkit for Districts and Schools](#)

This resource page provides links to principles, strategies, and tools to guide school and district planning for reopening.

[Investing Federal ESSER Funds in Recovery and Redesign](#)

This blog post highlights seven principles for investing Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund support for sustainable impact.

[Six Adaptations to Budget Planning for 2021–22](#)

This blog post outlines how districts should adapt their budget planning in 2021–22, given dramatically increased student need and uncertainties about budget projections and enrollments.

[5 “Power Strategies” \(and Real-Life Examples\) to Accelerate Equity-Focused Recovery and Redesign](#)

This resource identifies five research-based strategies for using resources that address critical student needs now while laying the foundation for continued systemic change.

Harvard Education Redesign Lab

[Getting Kids Back on Track: Supporting Students during the COVID-19 Crisis through Individualized Success Planning](#)

A guide to supporting students through individual success planning.

[Children’s Cabinet Toolkit: A Roadmap for Getting Started in Your Community](#)

A toolkit for building Children’s Cabinets, civic ecosystems that enable all children to thrive.

[Responding to COVID-19](#)

Resources for schools, districts, and families grappling with the health crisis.

Instruction Partners

[Continuous Improvement Toolkit](#)

Tools for getting organized, making a plan, and taking action.

[Many Things Are True](#)

A blog post by Emily Freitag on the tensions between “recovery” and “redesign.”

[Rethinking Intervention](#)

A series of videos on effective approaches to accelerating student learning.

Leading Educators

[Teaching for Equity](#)

A new framework to help teachers reflect on how they can use this moment of crisis to better serve the students furthest from opportunity.

The Learning Accelerator

[Hop, Skip, Leapfrog Project](#)

This project is engaging 20 districts and 10 national experts to identify practical, concrete innovations that districts have pursued to become more personalized, mastery-based, and supportive of students’ holistic development and will describe the structural and systemic shifts they needed to make to get there.

[Every Education Leader Deserves Expert Coaching to Manage Through and Beyond COVID-19](#)

A blog post on what the Learning Accelerator has learned from delivering expert coaching to districts during the pandemic.

[Remote/Hybrid Learning Guidance and Resources](#)

A research-informed framework and related training and implementation resources to help educators create a strong foundation for self-directed student learning and effective teaching through the strategic use of technology, pedagogy, and relationship-building.

[Real-Time Redesign](#)

A toolkit developed in collaboration with Bellwether Education Partners to provide leaders with a practical, inclusive, and rapid process for moving toward more equitable and resilient teaching and learning. The appendix includes case studies of three systems.

[Parabola Project](#)

A partnership between the Learning Accelerator and Ariadne Labs whose aim is to rapidly develop evidence-informed tools to help school system leaders identify options for school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Next Generation Learning Challenges

[The Question Everyone in Public Education Should be Asking Right Now](#)

A yearlong study that Next Generation Learning Challenges kicked off in January 2021 with eight other organizations to examine why some districts and schools were able to meet the pandemic with resilience and adaptive creativity.

[Transformation Design](#)

This framework represents three years of research into districts that have redesigned their working cultures to transform the learning experience for students. The website outlines a series of [entry points](#) into the work of transformation, including COVID-19.

Teaching Lab

[Teaching Lab Resources](#)

This page includes resources on how to accelerate student learning.



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