

BOUNCING BACK

Student-Centered Policy Priorities for 2021



AMERICA
SUCCEEDS

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AMERICA
SUCCEEDS

REPORT AUTHORS

Emilee Ramseur
Policy and Programs Analyst

Lauren Cole
*Vice President of Strategy
and Operations*

Eric Lerum
Chief Operating Officer

ABOUT THIS REPORT

We realize that the unprecedented level of uncertainty ahead makes planning an ambitious, strategic legislative agenda for 2021 impossible. In most cases, advocates are going to be focused on basic 'blocking and tackling' as legislators react to the ongoing crisis and its fallout. The push from education stakeholders will largely center on 'bouncing back' by addressing foundational needs like providing more services with (likely) fewer resources, keeping track of kids' attendance and physical well-being, supporting teachers and parent-teachers with remote instruction, and solving basic childcare issues. Of course, we cannot forget that all of this is happening in the midst of a generational fight to address the inequity that is a result of broader societal systemic racism. Equity, access, and opportunity are at the heart of America Succeeds' work. It is within that context we provide this set of policy recommendations. They are straightforward and foundational themselves; 2021 won't be the year to 'reinvent' our education system. Boldness right now will consist of getting the fundamentals right, and in some states, simply preserving them (see the section on assessment, for example). Likewise, what we're learning over the course of this year and next will provide markers for the longer-term roadmap to what our public education system can become, and we look forward to that discussion with our partners.

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ABOUT AMERICA SUCCEEDS

America Succeeds works to ensure public education systems prepare every student to succeed in the competitive global economy and contribute to their local community. Our mission is to improve educational opportunities, outcomes, and equity by harnessing the influence and acumen of the business community in accelerating systems change.

CORE BELIEFS:

- Education is a critical influence on an individual child's success and our communities' overall health and vibrancy.
- The most impactful changes in education are occurring through policies adopted at the state level.
- Business leaders have a unique and valuable perspective to bring to education policy discussions. There are both economic and moral imperatives to fight for kids and strengthen our education system.
- Lasting systems-change requires many stakeholders' active engagement – policymakers, educators, parents, students, community members, and business leaders.
- The long-term success of our economy, our nation's competitive advantage, and our national security require improving educational outcomes.

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Introduction

In 2017, *America Succeeds* recommended that our public education system needed to become more agile in order to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world where it was no longer certain which courses and learning programs merged with particular work pathways. Rather than establish a particular set model that would last decades, we posited that schools and districts must be prepared to adapt to technology, student interests, and workforce demands.

In [The Age of Agility](#) we predicted ongoing, disruptive periods of innovation and change.¹ *It's a big, bold future, we thought. Artificial intelligence and automation present the potential to change everything.*

The disruptive force of a global pandemic, however, was beyond anything we could have imagined. Within a matter of days, schools across the country shut down. Some jurisdictions were able to salvage some time by getting online instruction up and running, but for the [vast majority](#) of students and educators, the 2019–2020 school year simply ended.²

The 2020–2021 school year is just getting underway. Other organizations (namely the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) and [Education Week](#)) have done terrific work documenting state and district plans to serve students.³ Plans for schooling across the country run the gamut from in-person to fully remote to various hybrid models. They're also largely fluid as COVID-19 outbreaks, parent demand, and political pressure whipsaw leaders back and forth.

Likewise, we have relatively clear data regarding the challenges many students have simply accessing remote learning opportunities. [From the start](#), parents of low-income students were concerned about their children falling behind if they had to rely on technology and online learning rather than in-person.⁴ Approximately [one in five families](#) reported that for their children, reliable access to the internet or a computer could be a barrier to completing homework.⁵ Unsurprisingly those barriers are most stark for urban, low-income, and rural students. Connectivity isn't just about ensuring students are completing homework. Across the country, from [Los Angeles](#) to [Houston](#) to [Philadelphia](#), tens of thousands of students were unaccounted for because they weren't logging in online or hadn't been contacted by their teachers.⁶

Underlying all of the tension and competing factors influencing when students return to school is the simple fact, it's still the best environment for them to learn. Unfortunately, that reality is not just about the nature of teaching and learning, but also is reflective of our static public education system, one unprepared to adapt to large scale disruption or significant transitions in technology, demand, or student needs.

It is within this context that we look ahead to 2021 and a potential policy agenda for advocates. Even with unprecedented efforts to develop and distribute a vaccine, the pandemic will continue to alter education delivery for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, advocacy efforts must be shaped by a dual focus on 1) the need to rebound and recover and 2) the need to prepare for more disruption, whether due to a pandemic, natural disaster, or other large-scale intervening events.

Rebound and recovery is the most widely shared focus – 'catching up,' albeit over what is likely a three- to five-year period. Between accounting for the severe learning loss, particularly among students of color and students with fewer resources at home; chaotic

“The damage to individuals is consequential, but the consequences could go deeper: the United States as a whole could suffer measurable harm. With lower levels of learning and higher numbers of drop-outs, students affected by COVID-19 will probably be less skilled and therefore less productive than students from generations that did not experience a similar gap in learning. Furthermore, if other countries mitigate the impact of lost learning and the United States does not, this will harm US competitiveness. By 2040, most of the current K–12 cohort will be in the workforce. We estimate a GDP loss of \$173 billion to \$271 billion a year – a 0.8 to 1.3 percent hit.”

enrollment transitions among traditional brick-and-mortar schools, online programs, pods, homeschooling, and other options; and an interruption in assessment data (see below), it’s going to be years before we truly understand the depth of change wreaked by this pandemic. We cannot expect our education system to be ‘back on track’ anytime in the near future, and certainly states can’t get there without a coherent strategy.

Moreover, there is a strong economic imperative for rebounding from this crisis smarter and stronger than before. Prior to the pandemic, [McKinsey estimated](#) the economic effects of the persistent achievement gap to be equivalent to a permanent recession.⁷ Remote learning (already typically weaker than in-person models) is likely to be even more vulnerable to the same shortfalls – lack of quality instruction, environments not conducive to learning, etc. – for the same students – students of color, low-income, and rural students – that plague our traditional public education system. In short, gaps in achievement and opportunity will be exacerbated, perhaps by as much as 15 to 20 percent. McKinsey estimates that while the average learning loss may be around 7 months, it could be as great as 10 months for Black students and more than a year for low-income students. High school drop-out rates are likely to grow as well. The impact of COVID-19-related learning losses and higher drop-out rates will be felt in the United States for decades.

“The damage to individuals is consequential, but the consequences could go deeper: the United States as a whole could suffer measurable harm. With lower levels of learning and higher numbers of drop-outs, students affected by COVID-19 will probably be less skilled and therefore less productive than students from generations that did not experience a similar gap in learning.

Furthermore, if other countries mitigate the impact of lost learning and the United States does not, this will harm US competitiveness. By 2040, most of the current K–12 cohort will be in the workforce. We [estimate](#) a GDP loss of \$173 billion to \$271 billion a year – a 0.8 to 1.3 percent hit.”

The magnitude of what’s at stake in rebounding as quickly and fully as possible makes the second focus – preparing for future disruptions – that much more important. COVID-19 is not likely to [go away and stay away](#) anytime soon.⁸ Thus, even if schools get back to in-person instruction sometime during the 2020–2021 school year, there is no certainty of stability; ongoing flare-ups and spikes in cases are [anticipated](#).⁹ Even if the U.S. manages to get the virus under control and keep it there until there’s a widespread vaccine in use, this will [not be](#) the last pandemic.¹⁰ We’re very familiar with how [natural disasters](#) can disrupt school systems, and they are happening with [increasing frequency](#).¹¹

We must become better prepared for periodic, significant disruptions, [learn what we can](#), and develop more agile education systems to deal with them in a way that mitigates the impact on students, families, and educators as much as possible.¹²

America Succeeds spent much of the spring and summer of 2020 listening and learning. We attended countless webinars and read a mile-long list of browser tabs with articles on every aspect of the pandemic and education. We distilled from all of that information four key policy areas for advocacy over the next year: school finance, social-emotional learning, teachers and leaders, and assessment and accountability. We then contacted experts and thought-leaders who work on these policies, and posed a very straightforward inquiry: “If you were to push for policy in 2021, what would your ideal state look like? What would you prioritize and why?”

What follows is what we learned. It’s not intended to be an comprehensive list. There are many policy levers that need to be pulled, and some states may need help in certain areas more than others. Advocates usually have a limited number of policy plays in any given year, however; we know how frugal our partners must be with their political and social capital. America Succeeds believes these policy priorities are key to ensuring our schools, educators, and students bounce back from the current crisis and are more resilient and ready for the next one. Finally, these recommendations are consistent with core business principles that will drive educational opportunities, outcomes, and equity by harnessing the influence and acumen of the business community in accelerating systems change.

“We know that this isn’t the last time it’s going to happen. So how do we pay attention to the lessons we can learn from this spring and from districts who are continuing to do observations and other things? How can we incorporate that into some sort of more stable policy moving forward for when this happens again or something like this happens again?”

Kency Nittler, formerly with NCTQ



School Finance

Meeting the Challenge and the Need

--> WHY SHOULD THIS BE A PRIORITY?

Across the country, school district borders determine where students go to school, and how much money their schools will receive. Because a substantial portion of school funding is derived from locally controlled property taxes, lower-income communities and communities of color (after decades of suppression and disinvestment) with lower property wealth cannot afford to keep up. And states do too little to even the playing field. In fact, across the country, there is a [\\$23 billion gap](#) in funding between predominantly white and nonwhite districts.¹³ These same communities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and because of the economic downturn, their school budgets are threatened further. Fair and equitable funding is more important than ever, and it will be up to states to ease the pain.

--> WHAT DOES AN IDEAL STATE LOOK LIKE?

In conversation with Zahava Stadler, previously of EdBuild, she explained that for school funding systems to become more equitable, they need revenue sources that are as stable as possible and collected at the highest level possible (i.e. above the district level). They also need allocation systems that are adequate, equitable, responsible, and transparent. Achieving these goals would get us closer to an ideal state.

Revenue:

In order to create a pipeline of stable revenue sources that are collected at the highest level possible, EdBuild suggests pooling property tax collection up to the state level, or at least a level higher than the school district, so that local revenue sources are pooled and distributed equitably across the state or county. Zahava Stadler sums up, “The problem with local

property taxes isn’t the property, it’s the local. If you want to make sure that the state has a reliable source of education dollars going forward, you should think about moving some of those property taxes up to the state level.”

At the same time, most state-level education funding currently flows from the state’s general fund, which relies heavily on sales and income taxes (even though property taxes are a stable and non-regressive revenue source) that are very susceptible to events like the shutdown of half of the economy in a pandemic. Keep in mind that while a pandemic is rare, economic downturns are not; revenue constraints can be a perennial concern. That’s why revenue is only one half of the equation. How states ‘slice up the pie’ – how they allocate funds – is just as important.

Allocation:

All states use a funding formula to allocate education dollars, yet very

“I think that especially in a moment of revenue constraints, you discover how important it is that the structure of your funding is strong because the size of pie is going to grow and shrink over time. But a really good method of slicing it up is going to serve you well always.”

Zahava Stadler, formerly with EdBuild

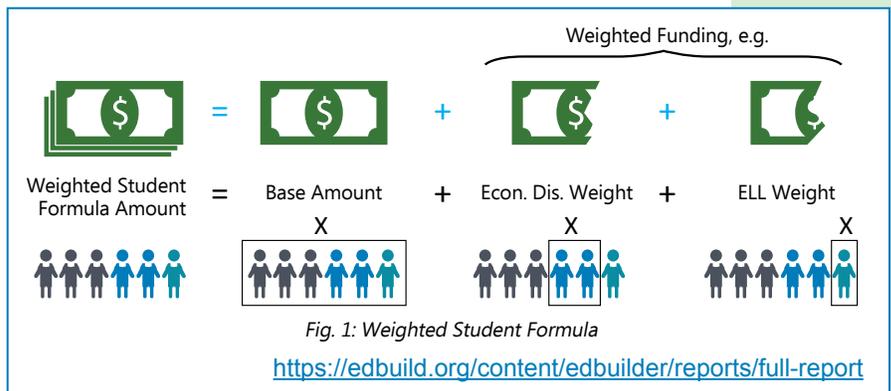
few of those funding formulas follow the [four key principles](#) outlined by EdBuild: 1) adequacy (funding should be ample enough to support a high-quality education), 2) equity (funding should be responsive to student needs), 3) responsibility (school and district leaders should be seen as responsible decision-makers, with attendant flexibility and accountability), and 4) transparency (formulas are simple and suited to clear reporting, enabling accountability for both district and legislative spending decisions).¹⁴

An ideal state has a weighted student-based funding formula, as it is the most equitable in terms of formula structures and allows for the focus to be on students' individual needs. With funding attached to students rather than programs or specific inputs, there is more room for flexibility and innovation. Weighted student-based funding formulas assign a base allocation that represents a basic per-pupil dollar amount, the amount is then adjusted upward by weights or multipliers based on student characteristics that require greater resources such as English-language learner designation, economic disadvantage, and disabilities.

--> WHO IS DOING IT WELL?

Revenue:

--> **VERMONT** schools are funded out of state revenue. Education dollars are pooled at the state level through a system that preserves local control over budgets even as revenues are shared. When property tax dollars are pooled at the state level, there is a greater ability to provide equitable funding and the issue of wealth of the local community is mitigated.



Allocation:

--> **MARYLAND** uses a weighted student-based funding formula. Each student starts with a base amount and a multiplier is added for each specific educational need to generate supplemental funding for students. The weights for English-language learners and low-income students are among the most generous in the country.

--> WHY SHOULD BUSINESS CARE?

We make an enormous investment in our public education system. In most states, education is one of the largest, if not the largest, line item in the budget. In business, the customer is a top priority, and the same should hold true with school funding. Revenue and allocation of funds for education should be designed to be fair and equitable and with student needs in mind first.

Centering funding on student needs and requiring all students receive their fair share also ensures we realize the greatest return on investment. [Research shows](#) that increasing education funding can improve student outcomes and that increased funding has the greatest impact when allocated to lower-income and underserved students.¹⁵ [One study](#) across seven states found that an additional \$1,000 per student improved student achievement and bumped the graduation rate by approximately nine percentage points.¹⁶ Particularly in the year ahead when lawmakers are likely to make significant cuts to state budgets due to declining revenue, it's critical that the cuts are done with equity in mind.

Social-Emotional Learning

Engaging Students Beyond Their Core Academic Skills

--> WHY SHOULD THIS BE A PRIORITY?

Over the last few years, the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) has increasingly become more evident. [Research](#) shows that having SEL supports in place is associated with an increase in student academic achievement, improved behavior, improved economic mobility, and improved life outcomes.¹⁷ Social-emotional learning enables students to develop the necessary skills needed to be successful in life and their career – skills like communicating effectively, being adaptable, problem-solving, and teamwork.

In the wake of COVID-19, social-emotional learning is receiving increased attention as more people see the positive and significant role it can play in addressing and overcoming the stress, trauma, and uncertainty of the pandemic and school closures. Prior to 2020, all 50 states had some level of SEL woven into their pre-kindergarten standards, yet only [18](#) states had competencies and standards in place for all K-12 students.¹⁸ As schools navigate reopening – whether that be in-person instruction, an online platform, or a hybrid of the two – it's likely they will be integrating social-emotional learning competencies more broadly across K-12 systems as they look to address growing student and educator needs.

As the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) put it in a recently released [report](#):

“While much uncertainty surrounds how and when school will reopen, we know that social-emotional learning will be critical to re-engaging students, supporting adults, rebuilding relationships, and creating a foundation for academic learning. School leaders will need to bring together administrators, teachers, school staff, families, youth, and community partners to co-create supportive learning environments where all students and adults can enhance their SEL competencies, feel a sense of belonging, heal, and thrive.”¹⁹

--> WHAT DOES AN IDEAL STATE LOOK LIKE?

Meeting social-emotional needs in schools is a key component of navigating the “new normal” students and educators are facing.



In an ideal state, districts and schools will create robust SEL supports for their students. How do you do that? We asked Nick Yoder, formerly the Director of Policy and Practice at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Nick described some necessary components - both at the state and district/school level - to take into consideration when advancing SEL.

At the state level, there are five key levers states can pull to advance social-emotional learning. These include:

1. For evidence-based SEL programs and practices, ensure mental health funding isn't cut from budgets
2. Leverage programs and data to drive SEL adoption and implementation
3. Ensure accountability includes diverse indicators for students success, such as school climate
4. Establish a statewide SEL advisory committee
5. Incorporate SEL in teacher preparation standards in colleges of education

At a district or school level, administrators should consider a curriculum focused on meeting student needs, advancing student achievement, and ensuring educators are prepared. That would include:

1. Opportunities for students to process the changes they may be experiencing at home, school, and in their communities by creating emotionally and physically safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments that promote students' social-emotional development
2. Innovative opportunities for learning that go beyond "seat-time" requirements
3. Opportunities for school staff and administrators to come together, align, and have a shared vision of how they're going to support students by first cultivating their own SEL competencies and capacities

--> WHO IS DOING IT WELL?

Only time will tell whether and how states embrace social-emotional learning integration into their curriculum. Prior to COVID-19, however, three states stood out as exemplars for their social-emotional learning standards and practices.

--> **ILLINOIS** has K-12 SEL standards in place that include goals, age-appropriate benchmarks, and performance descriptors that encourage integration of SEL instruction into curriculum, integration of SEL into existing structures and systems, promotion of students' feelings of autonomy and competencies, and providing opportunities for students to practice social-emotional competencies.²⁰

--> **WASHINGTON** has K-12 SEL standards, benchmarks, and indicators for students that include the development of self-awareness, self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, social management, and social engagement across all grade levels.²¹

"Getting some actual meat behind some of the social-emotional learning standards or competencies that states are developing and increasing the number [of clear and defined policies] is a key priority in a number of states."

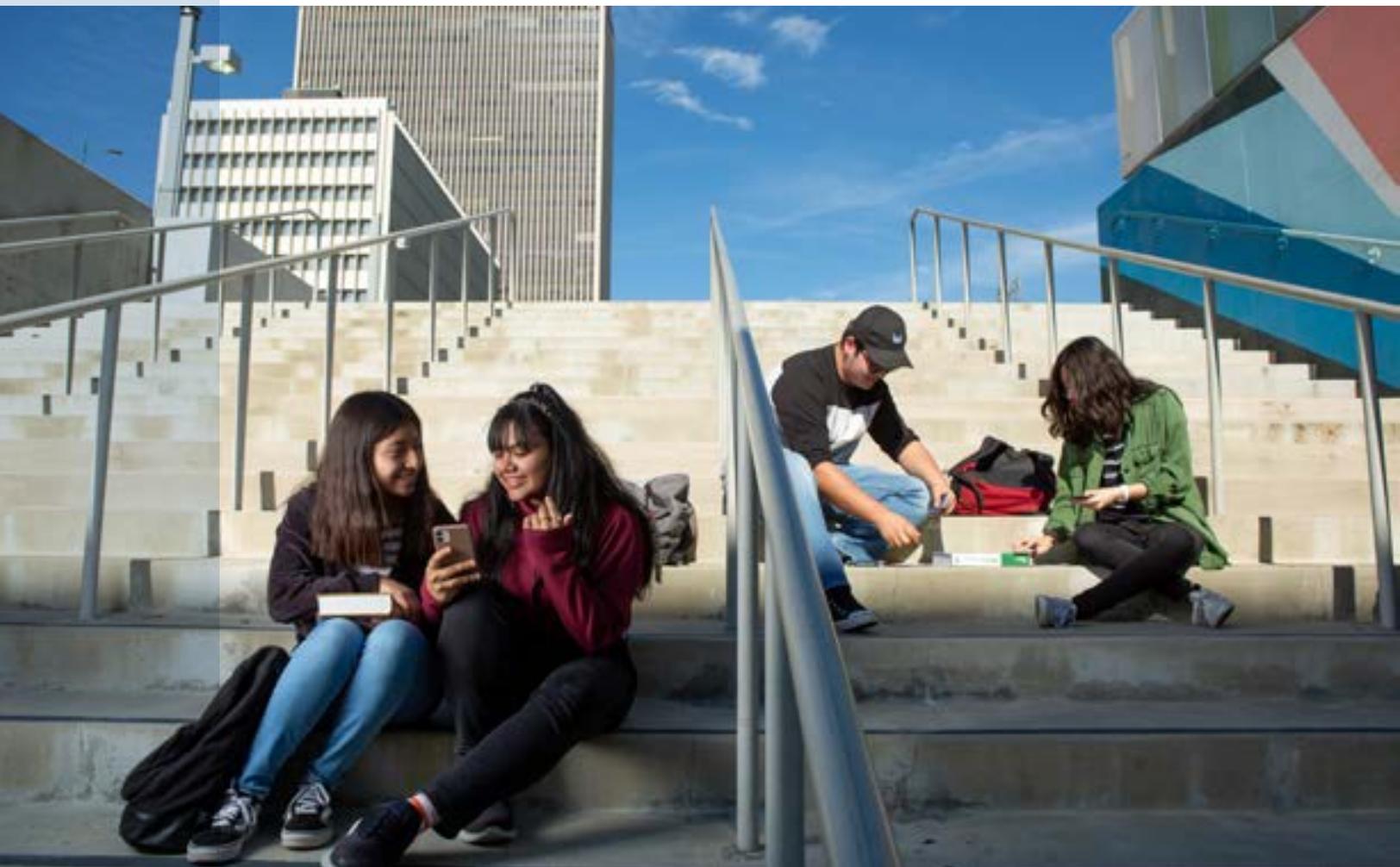
Nick Yoder, formerly with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

--> **MINNESOTA** has K-12 SEL standards implemented as part of its Safe and Supportive Schools Act, which connects SEL competencies to a school climate framework in coordination with their ESSA plan.²² The Minnesota competencies are **unique** because they include strategies and sample activities educators can use to support student development with additional guidance for assessment, professional development, equity, and district implementation.²³

--> **WHY SHOULD BUSINESS CARE?**

Today's economy calls for all of us – and particularly recent and future graduates – to embrace flexibility, to commit to a lifetime of learning, and to approach problem-solving creatively. Employers are already challenged by a lack of workers who possess important skills like critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration – all of which are SEL competencies.

Business leaders have an interest in championing the promotion of SEL competencies throughout our education system because it will directly benefit their organizations. Last year we released [The Case for Social Emotional Learning eBook](#) challenging business leaders to take on social-emotional learning as a mechanism to tackle their workforce challenges.²⁴ SEL not only has a critical role to play in mitigating the skills gap, but when students enter the workforce agile and ready, they provide businesses the opportunity to become more efficient and effective, and they're better equipped to navigate future challenges and evolving opportunities within the competitive global landscape.



Teachers and Leaders

Supporting Educators As They're Stepping Up

--> WHY SHOULD THIS BE A PRIORITY?

When COVID-19 struck, teachers and principals were forced to rapidly shift due to the disruption in teaching and learning. The burden on educators was great, and not unexpectedly, the [response](#) across districts was anything but uniform.⁴¹

More significantly, however, the disruption has forced numerous transitions upon students, from suddenly learning from a screen to substantial, if not total, loss of interaction with their peers. The most impactful may be the loss of contact, guidance, and instruction from their teachers. The impact of a great teacher on student learning is well established, and if the effects of the pandemic disruption are anywhere near as deep as feared, then the role of educators in catching students up becomes even more paramount. As Eric Hanushek recently [wrote](#): "To ameliorate the unfortunate learning losses, we actually have to make schools better than they were. The only way we know how to do that is relying more on the best teachers and less on the ineffective teachers."⁴²

To do this, districts will need the flexibility to deploy their human talent in new ways. States will also need strategies for supporting administrators and educators through a variety of models and scenarios.

--> WHAT DOES AN IDEAL STATE LOOK LIKE?

Whatever models states and districts deploy to deliver instruction during the rest of the pandemic, educators are sure to play a central role. Not surprisingly then, experts we talked with were emphatic that teachers and principals be front of mind for state policymakers.

Kate Walsh and Kency Nittler from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) believe the most important lever may be general flexibility around financial rules and evaluation. In a typical school year districts have funds allotted for certain areas that must be spent or they will be lost. It will be crucial that states give districts the leeway to redirect funding to areas most in need to address the extraordinary issues schools are currently facing. Holding states accountable for the same financial rules as an ordinary school year, when many are facing budget cuts, would be a huge miss that will further harm educational outcomes for students.

With educator evaluation, it will be tempting for states to waive evaluation requirements altogether. This would be a mistake. As any business leader would attest, it is crucial that districts and principals understand their workforce and their needs; states should give cover to ensure evaluation still takes place. Much of what teachers are encountering over the course of a pandemic school year is new to them, and almost certainly more challenging

"Now more than ever, we need to have a laser focus on increasing the ability of teachers to be effective and the strategic distribution of our most effective teachers. Teachers will be this nation's only vaccine against learning loss."

Kate Walsh, NCTQ

“One discussion that I wish was getting more attention from folks is how do we get teachers up to speed in ways that are not just technology, but merging the technology and content in an actual high quality instructional experience.”

Katharine Strunk, Education Policy Initiative Collaborative at Michigan State University

than their normal classroom situation. Teachers will need early and regular feedback and observations. At the same time, states should allow districts flexibility in determining the appropriate measures, particularly if state-level growth data and traditional methods of observation are unavailable (i.e. how do you evaluate a teacher who is not on-site?).

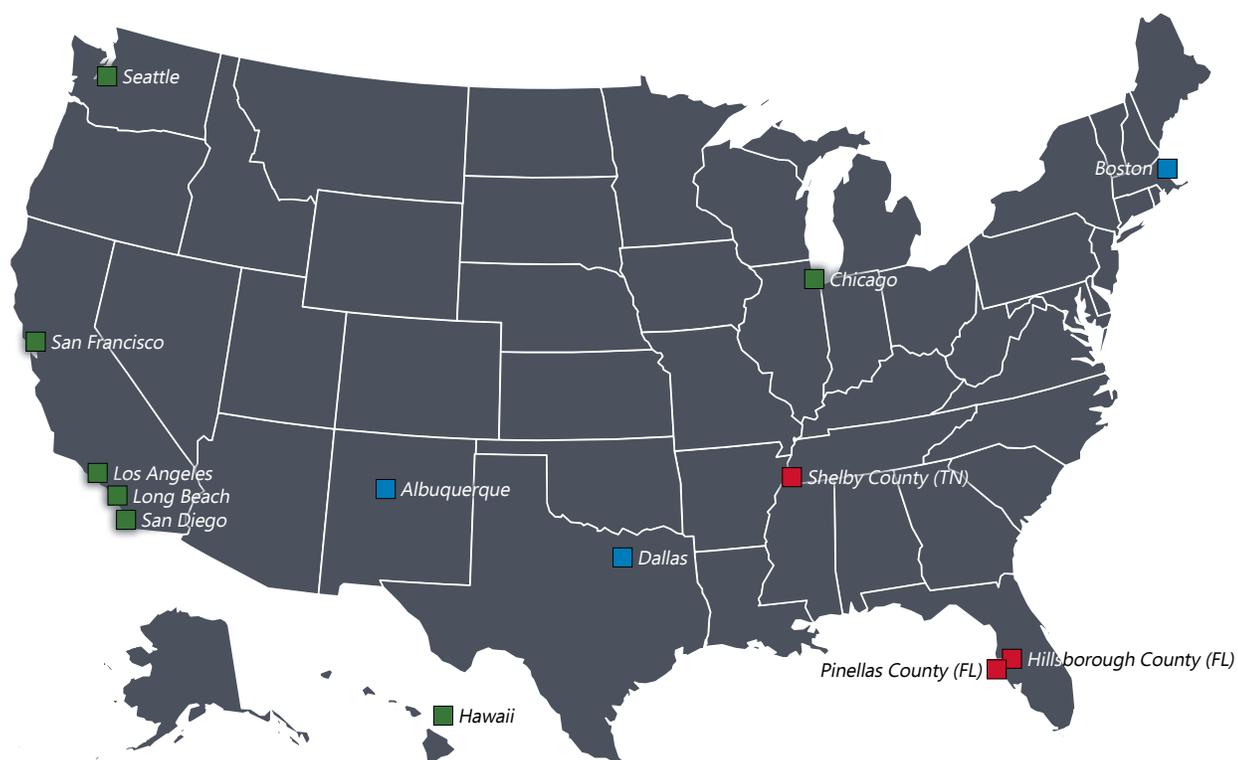
At the same time, states need to step up on professional development. Katharine Strunk at the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative at Michigan State University (EPIC) cautioned that the vast majority of teachers are teaching online for the first time, and districts struggle to provide training to help them meet the challenge. She emphasized the importance of broadening PD to focus not just on tips for utilizing the technology like a pro, but also on how to leverage those platforms to teach like a pro too, making the content engaging and accessible. Likewise, school leaders will need training on how to manage and coach their staff remotely.

States should establish a clearinghouse for lesson plans, instructional tips, and professional development from the best districts and state departments across the country.



--> WHO IS DOING IT WELL?

In an analysis of districts that have made concrete evaluation plans, NCTQ [identified](#) three trends that have emerged:²⁵



■ Suspend the evaluation process:

Hillsborough County (FL), Pinellas County (FL), Shelby County (TN) have stopped teacher evaluations.

■ Keep only formative evaluations:

Albuquerque, Boston, Dallas schools will only use formative evaluations but are encouraging feedback for teachers.

■ Issue summative evaluations when possible:

Encouragingly the most common practice so far (adopted by seven school districts – Chicago, Hawaii, Long Beach, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle) is to continue summative evaluations for all teachers to some degree.

--> WHY SHOULD BUSINESS CARE?

Teacher quality is fundamentally an issue of human capital – maximizing the potential of instructional talent for the benefit of the customer (students) – and business leaders know a lot about managing talent. Just as companies must [rethink their employee training and development](#) in order to ensure everyone is able to achieve their most during and after COVID-19, schools and districts cannot take their eye off of [what matters most](#) (in school) for student learning.²⁶ Advocating for better teacher quality through professional development opportunities and meaningful performance evaluation will help teachers be more effective in their jobs, reinforcing efforts to ensure every child has access to a great teacher. Improving teacher quality aligns solidly with strategies to make our public education system more customer-focused, transparent and accountable, and ultimately a better return on investment.

Assessment

Checking On Where Students Are and What's Working

--> WHY SHOULD THIS BE A PRIORITY?

The interruption of the 2019-2020 school year by the COVID-19 pandemic meant [56.6 million](#) students in the United States either converted entirely to remote learning or had their school year end early.²⁸ [Research](#) suggests that in a typical year, students will experience summer learning loss at a rate of 25-30 percent, with higher rates for Black and Latinx students.²⁷ Disruptions like a pandemic are sure to result in learning losses that far surpass what is typical.

While the [achievement gap](#) between white and minority students has been narrowing, the gap between wealthy and low-income students has been holding steady over the last few decades.²⁹ The ramifications of COVID-19 are certainly going to exacerbate these existing gaps. States must go without the data they would have normally collected from the spring 2020 summative assessment. Given that it's probable that disruption from the pandemic will continue through spring 2021, educators could grapple with how to gauge student learning growth and loss for at least the next two

school years, and maybe more.

Knowing where students are across the spectrum in learning and their development is critical to moving forward. Whether instruction happens online, in-person, or through a hybrid of the two, states and districts must adapt their assessment practices to a more uncertain environment.

McKinsey & Company's [report](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on student learning outlines three scenarios for schooling over the next year: students returning to full in-school instruction in fall 2020, in January 2021, or in fall 2021.³⁹ For each of these scenarios, McKinsey then estimated the learning loss of students (using projections from an [NWEA study](#)) based on the expected quality of their remote learning experiences.⁴⁰ The results are sobering – in all three scenarios, student learning loss will be significant. However, most concerning is the degree to which the achievement gap will likely be reflected in the final outcome, with students of color and low-income students falling even further behind their peers. The bottom line: without quality assessments, we will have no way of knowing what progress our students make and which programs are working for them, and our most underserved students have the most to lose.

“Smart thinking from state leaders now could provide valuable feedback about which students and schools need the most help and quantify how much students are learning – or not – during our collective distance learning experiment.”

Bellwether Education Partners

--> WHAT DOES AN IDEAL STATE LOOK LIKE?

Ideally, we would know where students are academically, socially, and emotionally at the beginning and end of the school year, as well as at any point a student enters a new learning program (e.g. a student switches from a virtual program to in-person instruction mid-year). Therefore an ideal state has both common diagnostics and a statewide summative assessment in place so that parents, teachers, and students are all on the same page when it comes to academic readiness, social-emotional well-being, and learning gains.

Diagnostic assessments

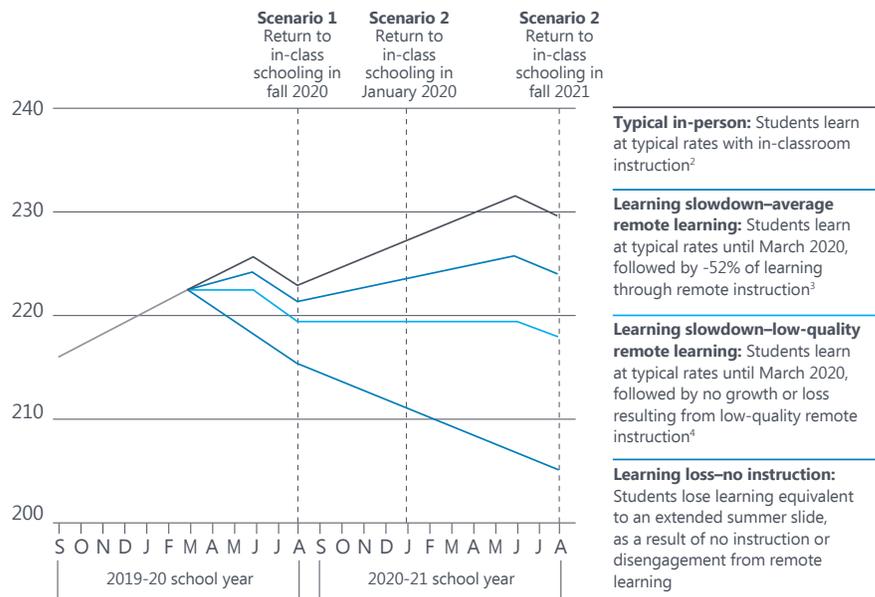
Beginning the school year with a comprehensive diagnostic assessment that measures both students' academic readiness and overall well-being is essential for collecting data on where students are after the spring's disruption. Diagnostic data will provide actionable information in real-time, guiding educators in their planning for what students need to get back on track. They're similar to routine health screenings. Likewise, given that over the next school year we're likely to witness more student transition between educational models and programs than ever before, diagnostic assessments will be a vital component of the overall instructional toolkit.

Unfortunately, most states appear to be leaving it up to districts to determine whether they check in on their students at all. This is a mistake, and parents know better.

In all three scenarios, students are at risk for significant learning loss.

McKinsey & Company

Projected 6th-grade math performance, example, NWEA¹ RIT Scores

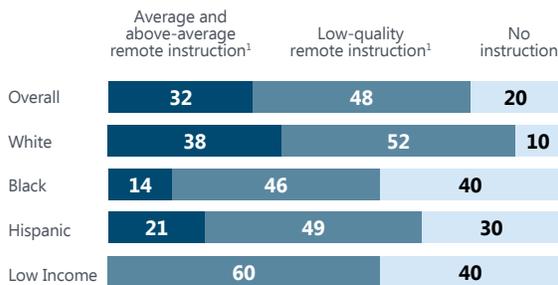


1 Estimates based on income quintiles, with assumption that top 2 income quintiles receive high-quality instruction.
 2 Includes 0.05 standard deviation reduction for black, Hispanic, and low-income students to account for recession impacts (~1 month of additional lost learning).
 SOURCE: US CENSUS 2018

Learning loss will probably be greater for low-income, black, and Hispanic students.

McKinsey & Company

Quality level of remote instruction, % of K-12 students



Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are at higher risk of not receiving remote instruction of average or above-average quality...

Average months of learning lost in scenario 2 compared with typical in-classroom learning²



...and the result is learning loss from student disengagement and/or lack of access

1 Estimates based on income quintiles, with assumption that top 2 income quintiles receive high-quality instruction.
 2 Includes 0.05 standard deviation reduction for black, Hispanic, and low-income students to account for recession impacts (~1 month of additional lost learning).
 SOURCE: US CENSUS 2018



The advocacy group Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) conducted a [poll](#) across all political viewpoints and found that 63 percent of parents (and 59 percent of all respondents) believe the state should be involved in the creation of standardized, curriculum retention assessments.³⁰ The Data Quality Campaign also found that [parents overwhelmingly support](#) using data to know whether their kids are at risk of falling behind.³¹

Summative assessments

In spring of 2020, [every state](#) canceled its annual summative assessment. States simply were not prepared to administer tests online and with a different testing window.³² While this is understandable, states must use this opportunity to prepare better for the future. We cannot afford to lose another year of data measuring how students are progressing and whether the resources we're investing are making an impact. Parents [strongly agree](#), with 77 percent of parents in a recent poll responding in favor of states resuming end-of-year assessments in 2021.³³

States should be working now with their vendors and stakeholders on how they'll administer a summative assessment in spring 2021.

Not since the adoption of Common Core have states and assessment vendors been so uniquely aligned in a search for better solutions; the field is wide open for innovation.

“We cannot underestimate the importance of assessment in the fall – teachers have to know where their kids are.”

Katharine Strunk, EPIC

Two key considerations should guide this work:

1. Make assessment timing more flexible – It’s now clear to everyone that relying on a single, short time period at the end of the year to administer a standardized assessment of student learning is highly vulnerable to disruption. States would be smarter to offer multiple assessment windows and to identify additional data points to collect in order to have a fuller picture of student performance.
2. Enable assessment from anywhere – States should make greater use of technology so that students can take an assessment from wherever they are. Gone are the days when we can expect all students to be gathered in one place at one time to take the same test. This year [the College Board demonstrated](#) it’s possible to make online assessment secure and accessible (no doubt with plenty of [lessons learned](#) to contribute as well).³⁴

--> WHO IS DOING IT WELL?

Whether and how states will implement summative assessments for the 20-21 school year is still very much an open question. [No states](#) have released their strategies, though the U.S. Department of Education has informed states.⁴³

We do have some insights regarding state plans for diagnostic assessment. The Center for Reinventing Public Education has an extensive [database](#) of state and district responses to school reopenings, and currently only six states require districts to issue student diagnostic assessments to measure student progress.³⁵

--> WHY SHOULD BUSINESS CARE?

Education and business both place a high level of importance on their assessment and accountability systems. Although each goes about it differently, both view them as essential tools for collecting data to influence decision making, determining what is and isn’t working, and holding their organizations accountable to their stakeholders. A return on investment – not just in terms of dollars, but also time and human capital – is imperative when distributing resources in an effort to be the most efficient and effective as possible. Having assessment mechanisms in place provides everyone a way to gauge their progress, make smarter decisions, and improve the overall performance of the organization.

State plans require diagnostic assessment:

Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland, North Dakota, Rhode Island, and South Carolina

State plans recommend diagnostic testing:

Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia

No suggestion of diagnostic assessment:

Alaska, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming



Final Thoughts

Clear Any Remaining Barriers

As we said at the outset, our report intentionally proposes a focused, straightforward agenda. States have a monumental task in front of them heading into 2021 as they continue to wrestle with the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 virus and deal with the economic aftermath of a partially shutdown economy. Eleven states could have new governors. [Nearly twenty states](#) could see shifts in party control in one or more of their legislative chambers.³⁶ Competition for the attention of policymakers will be fierce.

While getting policy levers in place for funding, social-emotional learning, teachers and leaders, and assessment is critical, states should also ensure that the three main actors in our education system – students, parents, and educators – are able to do what they need to without being constrained by other barriers often in place. We think getting that right comes down to three questions:

--> Do kids have the ability to participate in online classes and do their schoolwork?

Access to technology and the internet has been an issue long before the current pandemic, but its effects, particularly on those students already disadvantaged by our education system, are much more acute with the move to remote learning. Earlier this year, CRPE published [recommendations for states](#) in order to strengthen their digital infrastructure, such as scaling up common infrastructure needs (including internet access, a virtual instruction platform, and diagnostic assessments), promoting evidence-based instructional resources, facilitating learning and collaboration among districts, leveraging public and private partners, and setting clear baseline expectations for supporting students' learning needs.³⁷

--> Do parents have the ability to improvise with temporary solutions that mitigate disruption and help them keep their kids on track while they are still working?

COVID-19 has underscored the value of choice as parents search for the best option to suit their children and family. Some parents may need or prefer full-day, in-person instruction, particularly if they are unable to work from home. Others may be more comfortable with or available to manage a hybrid approach. Some parents may base their decision on the level of direct student engagement taking place through a fully online platform. At the same time, their options are changing as schools adjust to the needs and demands of the broader community as well as health and safety factors. Thus parents must be empowered to make whatever choice fits their child and unique situation best, regardless of the model. They need access to information about their options and a seamless-as-possible enrollment system.

States and districts should also allow maximum flexibility for '[learning pods](#)' to continue.³⁸ In the short term, there is no doubt this is good for students. Additional hurdles attached to homeschooling are not what's needed here. The growth of this innovation demonstrates that parents are looking for solutions that address multiple needs for their kids concurrently,

including additional instructional support, peer / social interactions, and childcare. Looking ahead to the longer term, there's also reason to believe that learning pods will become part of the ongoing landscape – a great resource that can be put into use whenever fully-open schools aren't possible and schooling at home or online isn't feasible or sustainable.

--> Do school leaders and educators have the ability to improvise and problem-solve without getting hung up with slow-moving bureaucracies, red tape, and restrictive contracts?

Imagine being a lead teacher and discovering a new curriculum tool that will help you and all of your colleagues better engage your students, and being told you'll have to wait for a long central office review before being able to purchase it with your school funds. Imagine being a principal and needing to reassign your teachers in order to maximize their strengths for the benefit of every student – putting those who are great at delivering lessons online at the forefront of more students and deploying your teachers who are best working directly with students in smaller breakout groups – and having that plan blocked because of archaic staffing rules.

When a major disruption like COVID-19 occurs, a cumbersome procurement process or restrictions on how to deploy resources are of little value and can actually hinder the ability of educators to meet students' needs. States should be working with districts now to ensure that state and local procurement, budgeting, and personnel rules are not barriers to responding to disruptions. Schools and districts need flexibility and autonomy to determine which adjustments they need to make to minimize loss of instructional time and serve students and families where they are. As any leader can attest, the right operational supports can make the implementation of any solution possible or impossible – states should pay attention to how their systems work in practice before a crisis is made worse.

So that's it. Those are the priorities. Get funding right. Don't discount SEL. Support teachers and leaders with meaningful feedback and development. Know where every student is and where they need to go academically and otherwise. Then move everything else out of the way. If advocates need a concise, targeted set of policies for 2021, we think these can help every student succeed.





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*(formerly) Collaborative
for Academic, Social, and
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www.AmericaSucceeds.org

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