

How Schools Can Help Children Recover from COVID School Closures

A Letter from Education Researchers

August 3, 2020

Preamble

COVID-19 has created an unprecedented challenge for America's K-12 schools. As policymakers and practitioners struggle to respond, they are weighing significant uncertainty and trade-offs that arise because of education, health, and budgetary concerns. The [consensus](#) is that students learned less during the spring's school building closures, and the learning losses were especially great for students with less access to devices, internet, quiet study areas, home and community resources and those with learning challenges.

The above inequities coincide with others in society, especially the history of racist oppression and violence inflicted, in particular, upon Black people in America. Consequently, the pandemic is likely to exacerbate long-standing inequities. The health and economic damage inflicted by COVID-19, the trauma that schools will be asked to address, the access to learning resources and opportunities—all of this [disproportionately](#) affects Black, Latinx, and Native American students.

We have come together for this public statement because the role of schools, under this crisis, is even more important now than under normal conditions. In addition to continuing their traditional role of developing human potential, schools play [key roles](#) in providing essential services, such as meals, after-school programs, and counseling, all while taking required steps to prevent the spread of the virus. After the sudden, unplanned closure of school buildings in March, schools attempted to quickly transition these essential activities to remote settings, with uneven success. How well schools can meet student needs in the fall will depend heavily on decisions made by policymakers.

We write to describe what we believe research can tell us about the fundamental issues facing policymakers and practitioners. Although we represent a broad diversity of policy perspectives, we are in agreement about the urgent need for the actions described below. Our goal is to bring research and evidence to bear in policymaking. We do not have the expertise to provide health or safety-specific recommendations and strongly urge leaders to consult such experts and take the recommended steps and precautions. Our goals are therefore limited but nonetheless speak to what we believe are some of the most pressing needs facing policymakers as they work to help educators serve all students, this fall and beyond.

Of course, there exists little research directly related to the effects of pandemics on education or the best ways for schools to respond to the current crisis. The situation is unprecedented. Yet abundant research explains how student needs arise and can be addressed within schools—research about school finance and resources, teaching and learning, summer school,

tutoring, learning time, trauma-informed instruction, online learning, and special education, to name a few. Each of these areas is relevant to the current predicament that policymakers face as they reopen schools and attempt to recover from the long absences from school buildings and the trauma that students experienced. These areas are also relevant to the extent the goal is not to go back to normal, but to transform schools by making them more equitable, effective and engaging learning environments.

In summary, we provide specific recommendations that fall under seven broad themes:

#1: Provide substantial additional resources to prevent looming school budget cuts.

#2: Implement universal internet and computer access.

#3: Target resources to those most in need.

#4: Provide the most personalized and engaging instruction possible under the circumstances, even when it is necessary to be online.

#5: Address the learning losses created by the crisis by expanding instructional time in ways that challenge, support, and engage students.

#6: Offer tailored, integrated support to each child in order to address social-emotional, physical health, and family well-being.

#7: Make decisions about teachers that support pedagogical quality and equity.

The first two roles in this list are primarily for state and federal governments—they cannot be done at the local level. The remaining items rely on local schools and districts working in partnership and coordination with state and often federal governments to ensure that all students receive the most effective and equitable access to resources possible.

While the pandemic and the simultaneous protests against the inequitable treatment of Black, Indigenous, and people of color have highlighted the critical need for broader policy/structural change, we hope these recommendations, focused on immediate options in front of policymakers and practitioners, help to move the country forward in small ways during these difficult times.

Detailed Recommendations

#1: Provide substantial additional resources to prevent looming school budget cuts.

Research is abundantly clear that [money matters](#) for student achievement and other [important life outcomes](#), and this is [especially](#) the case [for low-income](#) students. This is even more the

[case now](#), as most of the recommendations that follow will be difficult or impossible for schools to follow if they must transform what they do, yet with substantially fewer resources.

This is a role for the federal government. State and local governments cannot generally borrow funds to cover operating expenditures, nor can they realistically raise taxes in these difficult economic times. Moreover, some schools may be forced to scale back in-person time, making it difficult for parents to get back to work when it becomes safe to do so, which itself would then contribute to a cycle of reduced government revenues. The federal government must therefore take on the responsibility of, at a minimum, maintaining current [funding levels](#) for K-12 education; or, more appropriately, for [increasing spending](#) on K-12 education to help schools meet the growing needs of their students and communities during and beyond the pandemic.

#2: Implement universal internet and computer access. While this is particularly important for addressing the current crisis, these resources can complement in-person instruction in the years ahead. At the same time, caution should be used about shifting to fully online schools, which have a [poor track record](#) in prior research. Many of the recommendations that follow this are meant to address the limitations of fully online teaching.

Since this may take time to implement, schools and districts will have to work together with state policymakers to find some quick solutions while longer-term efforts are made to provide stable access to the internet and technology. They can, for example, work with internet companies to offer free service for the academic year for families meeting income eligibility guidelines, with some partial contribution from government agencies. They can also purchase the necessary technology, provide it to students so that they can access the internet (e.g., computing devices, hotspots), and provide technical support.

#3 - Target resources to those most in need. The crisis is [disproportionately harming groups](#) that are traditionally less well served by our public school system: poor students, students who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC), homeless students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and mixed-status immigrant families. Children of first responders, other essential workers (including educators), and the unemployed are likely also disproportionately affected. Educators and policymakers should try to account for the different needs of students and focus initially on those with the [greatest needs](#).

- *Learn about students' comprehensive needs.* Given the widely varying circumstances facing students during their time away from school, students' situations will be more varied and unpredictable than usual. A few core principles of assessment can help educators learn about and respond to those needs this fall.

- Before assessing students' academic competencies, teachers should begin the year by trying to understand students' social and emotional well-being and the conditions that might underlie students' learning struggles. Conversations with students and parents about their experiences over the last six months and

aspirations for the year will help to establish communication between teachers and parents as well as provide teachers with important information on where students are starting in the fall.

- Assessments should also be used by teachers and schools to identify and respond to learning and social-emotional needs. Learning needs include the support (material, design features, digital affordances, and human) needed to access, participate, and produce responses to learning challenges. This information helps shape the design of learning tasks and focuses feedback on the aspects of student activity that need support. For many teachers, assessment will focus on open-ended instructional tasks that do not take time away from instruction and place teachers in a helping (not evaluating) role with their students at the outset of the school year.

- More formal assessments of students' academic competencies should wait until students have time to settle back into learning. These assessment instruments should [align with the school's curriculum](#) and inform both classroom and school-wide planning. Educators should be supported and given time to make sense of the information the assessments yield. Critically, any assessments to diagnose students' needs in the fall should not be used for accountability in the spring.

- *Use flexibility in funding where it is available.* While many of us would like to see substantial changes in school funding formulas, this is a longer-term proposition that is unlikely to happen in the midst of the crisis. Nonetheless, there is meaningful discretion built into the current system that can allow educators and policymakers to target some resources to students most in need. For example, school districts usually have authority over how resources are allocated across their schools and should consider providing more funds to schools with the highest concentrations of student need.

- *Target resources to low-income students and students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).* As has become increasingly clear, today's current system of education disadvantages students who are low-income and BIPOC. The pandemic has further exacerbated these disparities that are built into the system, with [low-income](#) and [BIPOC](#) the most adversely impacted by school building closures. These students are also those who are likely most affected by the pandemic in their larger communities. Resources should be targeted to address these students' access, educational, social, mental, and health-related needs.

- *Target resources to English learners (ELs).* Even before the pandemic, many ELs and former ELs who are still on a continuum of learning English were at a serious disadvantage educationally, frequently isolated in low-performing schools, and among the most economically disadvantaged of all students. They also tend to live in homes

where adults are not fluent in English and have no history of going to school in the US; their parents often do not understand the routines and expectations of American schools and are often not able to help their children with school lessons. They are also [less likely](#) to have computer skills and regular access to the internet. The pandemic has simply multiplied their challenges. Although ELs are overwhelmingly US citizens, they are almost always children in [immigrant families and 6.1 million US citizen](#) children live in mixed-status families where someone is undocumented. More important than language instructional issues, this fact exposes these students to constant threat, stress and worry that affects their general health and wellbeing as well as their ability to concentrate on learning. For many ELs these months away from school have meant a lack of exposure to English. When compared to middle class students, many of whom have had the advantage of a parent at home, the learning gaps have likely grown wider still. ELs therefore need additional learning time—[above and beyond](#) that provided for other students—and, in many cases, they need mental health interventions due to the [stress](#) they have been living under. EL students will need targeted language instruction (preferably in English and primary language) to catch up as well as regular opportunities to be mixed with English-dominant students. (See additional recommendations later regarding EL teachers.)

- *Target resources to students with disabilities.* The right to a free, appropriate education remains intact during the COVID crisis. The reality of delivering on this promise is difficult. Roughly two-thirds of the students with disabilities in the US attend school in general education classrooms and research suggests that students with disabilities were being especially poorly served this past spring. Teachers in these settings need support in making materials accessible, offering multiple means of representation in learning activities as well as assignments, and providing accessible feedback. While these approaches to learning design are features of inclusive classrooms, designing learning online or in hybrid contexts takes skills that many classroom teachers are having to develop on the fly as they prepare learning activities for their students. Teachers will need time to collaborate with learning specialists and/or special educators to ensure that lessons are accessible.

- Families, in particular, are bearing the brunt of organizing and sustaining significant time on school activities completed at home. Home behavioral support is critical for a subset of families whose children have significant needs. Individualized educational plans and 504 plans will need to be maintained and modified to translate into hybrid, online, and home learning situations, and even to schooling contexts in which staff are asked to take on new duties and roles. Especially in areas where educational solutions entail more days of schooling at home, such as rural, geographically diffuse areas or those with high rates of infection, getting support is crucial for families.

- *Provide additional supports for homeless students whose numbers are likely increasing as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic.* Their [access to online instruction](#) is generally spotty or non-existent, and their need for stability via their school is [critical](#). These students should be considered as some of the first to receive in-person services so that they can maintain their engagement in education and associated social, mental and health-related supports.
- *Give priority attention for additional learning time and in-person (and remote) assistance to students with disabilities, ELs, and homeless students.* If schools must limit the number of students brought back for in-person instruction for public health reasons, then these are the students who should receive priority attention. (See also below regarding very young children.)

#4 - Provide the most personalized and engaging remote instruction possible under the circumstances, even when it is necessary to be online. This is more difficult to do when schools are not operating in person, but there are a variety of tools and strategies available that allow engagement remotely, especially when combining live interaction among students and teachers with well-designed assignments and projects that students can complete at home and that are organized within a coherent curriculum.

Online learning can vary dramatically in quality. On the one hand, today's virtual schools seem to [generate much less learning than in-person schools](#). On the other hand, [when online learning is well-designed](#) it can be a very helpful resource, [at least for students who have other instructional supports](#). Therefore, when providing remote instruction, consider best practices:

- [Frequent, direct and meaningful interaction is critical](#). In online learning environments where there is little student-student, student-instructor, and student-content interaction, students are more likely to become disengaged and at higher risk of dropping out. Fully online courses with little high-quality interaction also contribute to gaps in educational success across socio-economic groups. [Students with more extensive technology-using experience](#), strong academic backgrounds, and self-directed learning skills tend to do better in fully online learning situations whereas students who are already vulnerable face greater challenges.
- [Combine synchronous and asynchronous instruction](#). Combining synchronous activities where students meet regularly online (or in-person) with their classmates and teachers, with asynchronous activities where students think deeply and engage with the subject matter and other students independently are preferable to fully online courses. Specifically, various studies suggest that, to be most successful, learning environments should include asynchronous online elements where students can go at their own pace on their own time and have some choice over their learning. These asynchronous elements should be combined with synchronous activities that engage deeply and critically with course content; [students online should be interacting with other students](#).

[their teachers, and content](#) at the same time, with positive interdependence in cooperative learning and continuous formative feedback. To design and implement these quality online environments, [teacher training and support is crucial](#). (It also goes without saying that schools and districts need to ensure students are connected and have the necessary technology hardware, software and support they need).

- *Remote learning is less effective with very young students.* While there is very little research about remote learning with elementary age students, what we know about executive function suggests that successful remote learning requires the active engagement of an adult. This should be considered in deciding which students come back for in-person instruction (when public health conditions allow) and how synchronous and asynchronous elements are designed and integrated.

#5: Schools should address the learning losses created by the crisis by expanding instructional time in ways that challenge, support, and engage students. Tutoring, summer school, and extended school years have proven effective in other contexts.

- *Instructional Learning Time:* There is little question that students lost out on learning time in the 2019-20 school year, or that they will face greater difficulties in the 2020-21 school year. One way to combat the associated learning loss could be to [increase instructional learning time for students](#). This may be especially important for the students who have suffered the most from COVID. [Studies](#) have shown that longer school years increase learning for EL, special education, and low-performing students. Similarly, schools can [shift the traditional organization of schools](#) in order to make space for more learning time.

- *Tutoring:* When students return in the fall, whether in-person, online, or in some hybrid form, they will need targeted and effectual instruction to help remediate for learning loss and support learning gains. Researchers and policymakers have suggested [bringing in a core of tutors](#) who can augment K-12 instruction, targeting students' specific needs. In particular, research supports [high-dosage tutoring](#) (HDT) in which [tutors](#) work consistently every day for full class periods with students, usually in one-to-one or one-to-two settings. [These tutors](#) are not intended to replace teachers but rather to augment traditional instruction to help speed academic recovery. Even in normal times, tutoring is one of the most [cost-effective](#) strategies to promote student learning.

- *Summer school and programming:* There is ample evidence that [summer programming](#) can help to reverse traditional bouts of "summer slide," helping all students, and in particular low-income students, to lose less ground over the long summer break than they otherwise would, and even [gain skills and make progress](#) towards increasing their knowledge. Resources should be provided to help schools provide these kinds of high-quality summer programming to help identified students overcome the challenges they face as a result of extended periods of time out of the

classroom. While the current school year is coming to an end, next summer will present another opportunity for schools to leverage these additional learning opportunities.

- *Grade retention.* Students had 6-7 months of regular, in-person instruction before the COVID crisis. The loss of 2-3 months is a real and unfortunate consequence, especially for the 20% of students who received essentially no remote instruction after school buildings closed. Some of these students may need to be retained in grade. However, schools should be careful. There is consistent [research](#) suggesting that grade retention, without strong additional interventions to improve academic performance, can have long term deleterious effects on retained students. As such, we recommend first working to meet students where they are with personalized instruction and instructional interventions like the ones discussed above before considering retention of impacted students on a case by case basis.

#6 - Provide resources for tailored, integrated student support to each child in order to address social-emotional, physical health and family well-being.

- Schools have a responsibility to protect the physical and mental health of students under their care. The needs of children and youth impacted by the pandemic are not just academic. All have experienced the traumatic event of being suddenly removed from school over many months and many have undergone serious economic, health, and social stresses in their families. All children will suffer some consequences, many of which will resolve with time. Some children, however, will develop more intensive trauma that may persist for [some time](#). Some children will suffer [complex trauma](#) because of the multiple traumatic experiences they have experienced.

- Along with a range of academic concerns, children will be re-entering school with varying levels of challenge across other critical aspects of development including social-emotional-behavioral, physical health, and family domains. Student support staff (school counselors, social workers, nurses and family outreach workers) [will be critical](#) to these efforts.

- Mental health, medical and social service wrap-around supports will be critical for these students as they return to school and can be delivered as part of an integrated student support services approach. Developing a system and practical strategies for identifying and tracking each student's strengths and needs across the major developmental domains, and connecting every student to a customized set of in-school and community resources will make a significant difference to their long-term academic [achievement](#) and development. Parents/caretakers of toddlers, preschoolers, children, [ELL students](#), and youth with special dis/abilities will require additional resources to reduce stress as they collaborate with educators to continue to educate their children. Importantly, identifying the unique challenges of families will be necessary in order for their children to make academic and social progress. Resources must be provided not

only to continue meeting students' socio-emotional, health and family-related needs, but also to address the ways the pandemic has exacerbated these needs.

- Developing a systemic approach and practical strategies [is essential](#) for identifying and tracking each student's strengths and needs across the broad developmental domains and for delivering universal services to all children, some services to children who require early intervention, and intensive services to the smaller number of students with significant need. Developing systemic approaches to integrating supports for students will be [cost-effective](#) in the long-run.

#7 - Make decisions about teachers that support pedagogical quality and equity.

- *Maintain teacher employment to the extent possible, foregrounding the need to best serve the most disadvantaged students.*
 - If teacher layoffs are necessitated due to inaction from the federal government in providing sufficient funds to replace lost state and local revenues, then prioritize retaining higher-performing teachers, no matter their experience level, so that critical expertise in the system is not lost.¹
 - If teacher layoffs are necessary, prioritize retaining special education and bilingual/EL teachers. Teachers certified in special education are demonstrably more effective with students that have special needs than those uncertified in this area. Also, students for whom English is not a native language are especially vulnerable, not only because of their learning needs, but because of the continued political assaults on immigrants. With students working remotely, bilingual teachers are also essential for communicating with parents.
 - If teacher layoffs are necessary, prioritize continued employment of qualified teachers in shortage areas (e.g., science) and in low-income schools where turnover is already high.
- *Support teacher development, induction, coaching, and collaboration.* The job of teaching in the midst of a pandemic is both different and more challenging than ever before. Teachers are having to adjust their curricula while at the same time learning new pedagogical methods and tools. Teachers must be supported in these efforts. Any form of support should align with [evidence-based practices](#), such as sustaining support over time and involving teachers in active learning embedded within their particular instructional setting and job. One effective approach is [dedicated time for collaboration](#) – allowing teachers to collectively learn and try out new pedagogical strategies, examine

¹ High-quality formative and summative evaluations of teacher performance are important, and these should be developed in ways that promote useful practices and avoid negative, unintended consequences for curriculum and pedagogy.

information about student learning and their own classroom practices *and* determine next steps for instruction. Guided assistance from and collaboration with experienced coaches has shown to be [effective](#) for improving instruction and student performance and could be particularly helpful to teachers during this time - and [evidence suggests](#) virtual coaching can be just as effective in-person coaching. While limited resources may lead to a prioritization of support for new teachers (in the form of induction), all teachers likely need support with changing conditions – such as developing lessons that work both on-line and in-person, teaching to students who must remain six-feet apart and who cannot share materials, and addressing trauma and other psychological needs likely facing students as they return to school. One option might be to target coaching to new teachers and engage all teachers in collaborative learning with peers.

- *Teacher communication with parents is one particular area in which teachers could use help.* With remote learning, teachers and parents are essentially equal partners in the learning process.

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[1] The signers all agree that high-quality formative and summative evaluations of teacher performance are important, and these should be developed in ways that promote useful practices and avoid negative, unintended consequences for curriculum and pedagogy.