

## **Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond**

### **Executive Summary**

**Linda Darling-Hammond, Abby Schachner, and Adam K. Edgerton**

**in collaboration with Aneesha Badrinarayan, Jessica Cardichon, Peter W. Cookson Jr., Michael Griffith, Sarah Klevan, Anna Maier, Monica Martinez, Hanna Melnick, Natalie Truong, and Steve Wojcikiewicz**

Across the United States, state education agencies and school districts face daunting challenges and difficult decisions for restarting schools as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. As state and district leaders prepare for what schooling will look like in 2020 and beyond, there is an opportunity to identify evidence-based policies and practices that will enable them to seize this moment to rethink school in ways that can transform learning opportunities for students and teachers alike.

Our current system took shape almost exactly a century ago, when school designs and funding were established to implement mass education on an assembly-line model organized to prepare students for their “places in life”—judgments that were enacted within contexts of deep-seated racial, ethnic, economic, and cultural prejudices. In a historical moment when we have more knowledge about [human development and learning](#), when society and the economy demand a more [challenging set of skills](#), and when—at least in our rhetoric—there is a greater [social commitment to equitable education](#), it is time to use the huge disruptions caused by this pandemic to reinvent our systems of education. The question is: How we can harness these understandings as we necessarily redesign school? How can we transform what has not been working for children and for our society into a more equitable and empowering future?

This report provides an overarching framework that focuses on how policymakers as well as educators can support equitable, effective teaching and learning regardless of the medium through which that takes place. This framework provides research, state and local examples, and policy recommendations in 10 key areas that speak both to transforming learning and to closing opportunity and achievement gaps. It illustrates how policymakers and educators can:

1. Close the digital divide
2. Strengthen distance and blended learning
3. Assess what students need
4. Ensure supports for social and emotional learning
5. Redesign schools for stronger relationships
6. Emphasize authentic, culturally responsive learning
7. Provide expanded learning time
8. Establish community schools and wraparound supports
9. Prepare educators for reinventing school
10. Leverage more adequate and equitable school funding

Each of these 10 policy priorities will help schools reinvent themselves around principles of equity, authentic learning, and stronger relationships, and they require shifts from policymakers and educators alike.

## Priority 1: Close the Digital Divide

The digital divide parallels the educational divide, and unless it is closed now, it will result in an ever-widening learning gap. Universal broadband and device access is the absolute minimum for ensuring that every child can continue learning throughout the 2020–21 school year, and the costs of closing the divide are small relative to the overall investments being made to address the pandemic. To accomplish this, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Prioritize federal efforts to close the digital divide.** To stem learning loss, every student, no matter her or his living situation, needs access to an adequate computing device and internet connectivity. Given the major economic downturn and [state revenue declines](#) accompanying pandemic-related shutdowns, federal recovery funds to education are needed to supplement state budgets for this purpose. Less than half of 1% of what the federal government has already spent on the recovery is needed to [close the digital divide](#) for schoolchildren.
2. **Expand broadband access through state and city initiatives.** States and cities can follow the lead of pioneers that have [significantly expanded broadband access](#) through progressive regulation and leveraging of public and private funding streams.
3. **Organize access to devices and connectivity.** Once every home has the potential for internet access, many students will still need Wi-Fi and a device adequate to support schoolwork in order to participate in distance and hybrid learning. States and districts need to survey device needs and work proactively with service providers and families to buy devices and hot spots in bulk and help them become usable in many different contexts.

## Priority 2: Strengthen Distance and Blended Learning

Once all students have access to high-speed internet and devices, the challenge of implementing high-quality distance learning and blended learning models remains. Plans for [continuity of learning](#) are essential to enable teaching to occur without disruption. To strengthen distance and blended learning, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Share pioneering efforts among districts.** While this new era may feel like uncharted educational waters, educators can be guided in part by successful pioneers and by principles rooted in equity and authentic learning. Strategies can be informed by pioneering districts such as [Miami-Dade](#) in Florida, and [Lindsay Unified](#) in California.
2. **Support high-quality distance and blended learning models with educator training and materials.** To be effective, online learning should follow [research-based principles](#) to be as interactive and authentic as possible, combining live interaction among students and teachers with interactive multimedia materials that support well-designed assignments and projects that students may complete at home.
3. **Give special consideration to early childhood learning.** As the [National P-3 Center](#) and [Edutopia](#) have outlined, early childhood is a unique developmental period that requires a customized approach, including modeling and teaching strategies to caregivers at home, using accessible materials to promote equity.
4. **Develop standards for digital learning that articulate how technology should be used to empower learners.** Productive policies for using technology involve using interactive technologies in concert with teachers and peers to enable learners to explore and create

rather than to experience “drill and kill.” States can encourage these more effective uses of technology by creating standards and guidance and offering strong models for others to learn from.

5. **Enact distance learning with attention to equity.** Strategies such as creating “learning hubs” that transform community spaces for student support are needed to ensure that students with the highest needs, including youth experiencing homelessness, those without internet, and those with working parents who cannot afford child care, can engage productively in distance and blended learning.
6. **Shift from measuring seat time to engagement.** The role of attendance in a hybrid, student-centered learning system shifts from time spent in class to engagement, participation, and student outcomes. Many states need to rewrite attendance laws and regulations so that they can track student engagement through competency-based tasks.

These principles and practices can help districts and schools successfully implement strong and more equitable models of learning that will serve students in the current crisis and in the future.

### Priority 3: Assess What Students Need

Schools need to take stock of all of their students’ experiences and needs as they build safe and welcoming communities, both in person and virtually, when school begins. To support the use of effective assessment processes moving forward, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Ensure that schools have the time and tools to take stock of children’s overall needs.** School leaders can use surveys and other tools to learn what students and staff have been experiencing and ensure social and emotional supports. They can also identify and leverage community partners and resources to support all students across in- and out-of-school settings.
2. **Prioritize assessments that illuminate student growth and learning.** State and local leaders can emphasize authentic diagnostic and formative assessment approaches rather than decontextualized summative assessments; provide access to diagnostic assessment tools; support locally relevant assessments connected to curriculum and instructional resources; and avoid overtesting by making use of expertise, tools, and assessment data that are already available.
3. **Support acceleration of learning, not remediation.** While many districts and educators may feel pressure to address learning loss by holding students back or tracking them for remedial instruction, research shows that grade retention and “down tracking” actually undermine achievement. Formative assessment that includes actionable feedback immediately applied through practice and revision of work can more rapidly improve learning, especially when used with tailored acceleration strategies. This personalized instruction is best informed by the use of high-quality performance tasks such as those from the Balanced Assessment of Mathematics or the Developmental Reading Assessment that provide rich information, not just scores.

4. **Invest in teachers' knowledge and skills for formative assessment.** Policymakers and school leaders can support ongoing and embedded teacher professional learning for formative assessment, including through [micro-credentialing](#), and build capacity for meaningful use of existing assessment information that is already part of a teacher's repertoire.
5. **Move toward more coherent systems of assessment of, for, and as learning.** Formative and summative assessments should represent ambitious learning goals and be [coherently linked](#) through a well-articulated model of learning that incorporates learning progressions, along with intermediate stages and instructional means for reaching those goals. States and districts can use this moment to consider how to create more thoughtful systems of assessment that accomplish these goals, as [New Hampshire](#) has done and a growing number of other states are doing, using [federal waivers](#) that may set the stage for new approaches when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is reauthorized.

While it is important to assess what students learned at home over the past several months, it is equally if not more important to shift away from deficit-oriented strategies and decontextualized modes of assessment toward authentic, formative assessments that are part of a coherent strategy to improve student learning.

#### **Priority 4: Ensure Supports for Social and Emotional Learning**

Integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into the life of a school is essential to mitigate the pandemic's impact on lifelong success and learning. To ensure supports for SEL, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Implement a comprehensive system of support.** Effective school environments take a [systematic approach](#) to promoting children's social, emotional, and academic well-being, including counseling and additional behavioral, [mental health](#), and [trauma](#) supports.
2. **Ensure opportunities for explicit teaching of social and emotional skills at every grade level.** These include locating a place in the curriculum and school day in which students and educators can develop and practice key skills and competencies, such as [morning meetings](#) and [advisories](#); developing or adopting an [evidence-based SEL program](#); and using [strategies for managing stress](#), such as mindfulness and other techniques that calm and center thinking and emotions.
3. **Infuse SEL into instruction in all classes.** Students need opportunities to develop social and emotional skills [throughout their school day](#). Schools can leverage readily available curricular resources, such as [Facing History and Ourselves](#), [EL Education](#), and [Transforming Education](#), that include embedded SEL. They can also provide guidance and training to help educators [integrate SEL skills](#), including executive function, collaboration, and productive mindsets, into daily work.
4. **Institute restorative practices.** SEL programs cannot enable meaningful long-term growth for students in environments that are otherwise authoritarian, punitive, and exclusionary rather than educative and inclusive. Instilling more educative and inclusive environments can be accomplished by ending zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline and adopting [equity-oriented restorative practices](#) in their place.

5. **Enact policies that enable SEL and restorative practices.** States and districts can help schools to implement these practices by adopting [clear standards](#) and guidance for SEL, trauma-informed practices, and restorative practices as well as providing funding and supports for curriculum resources and [ongoing professional development](#).

## Priority 5: Redesign Schools for Stronger Relationships

Research shows that [school designs that support caring and continuity in student–teacher relationships](#) are more able to address trauma and strengthen achievement than traditional factory model schools. In addition, the latest [international](#) and [U.S. guidance](#) makes clear that safely reopening school buildings and resuming in-person learning requires having fewer students and staff interact face-to-face. Relationship-centered cohort designs will be key. To redesign schools for strong relationships, educators and policymakers can:

1. **Create structures that foster health and safety, as well as personalization and trust, among children and staff.** Policymakers and school leaders can help schools put these structures into place by offering models of new designs and removing regulatory impediments. This can be accomplished by maximizing relationships through [looping](#), [advisories](#), and [small mentored groups](#) and by restructuring schools to create [small cohorts or houses](#) that stay together.
2. **Strengthen partnerships with families.** Out of necessity during school closures, many schools and districts have found new strategies and routines for connecting with families that should not be lost with reopening but rather should become part of the core approach to education. [Virtual home visits](#) are one of the many strategies that schools can use to build relational trust and make families [feel welcome](#).
3. **Cultivate supportive environments filled with emotional safety and belonging.** To provide the emotional supports students need to learn, schools and educators can dedicate time at the start of the year for intentional community building while designing learning experiences and cohorts that promote inclusion and reduce segregation, allowing children to interact and learn in [heterogeneous](#) groups and classes.
4. **Enact policies that support relationship-centered designs.** These include removing impediments to and providing supports for [relationship-centered school designs](#). These designs can be paired with policies that provide time and funding for collaboration and capacity building among staff and for staff outreach to students and families, including home visits and regular check-ins.

These strategies can help foster strong relationships even in virtual environments and in ways that can promote the health and success of the entire school community for generations to come.

## Priority 6: Emphasize Authentic, Culturally Responsive Learning

Schools that have successfully motivated students to engage in learning even when schooling has been disrupted have [connected lessons to real-world applications](#), allowing students to explore the world around them and to demonstrate what they know through projects and presentations that display the products of their work. To support this kind of learning, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Offer guidance for how schools can restart by focusing on authentic learning and assessment strategies.** States and districts can support curriculum that emphasizes opportunities for students to meet standards through student-driven projects.
2. **Provide curriculum tools and professional learning for educators to support more authentic learning and assessment.** States and districts can offer schools and educators opportunities to engage in professional learning; to join [networks of schools](#) that have created productive approaches to learning; and to access standards-based curricula they can draw upon and adapt to develop authentic learning experiences for students—such as [project-based learning](#) and [performance-based assessments](#), including [capstone projects](#).
3. **Ensure that authentic learning is also culturally connected and culturally sustaining.** Schools and districts can support educators in developing and using culturally responsive [curriculum](#) and [pedagogies](#) as a means for engaging and deepening student learning by recognizing their students’ experiences as a foundation on which to build knowledge.
4. **Build capacity for inclusive, identity-safe, culturally responsive practice.** State and local leaders can help build the capacity of school staff by providing resources, time, and space for professional learning that include [identity-safe schools and classrooms](#), strategies to address stereotype threat and implicit bias, and proactive approaches to anti-racist practice and [culturally responsive pedagogies](#).
5. **Redesign assessments to emphasize applied learning and complex problem-solving.** A growing number of [states](#), schools, and districts are working together in collaboratives from [New York](#) and [Massachusetts](#) to [California](#) and [Hawaii](#) to create equitable and high-quality performance assessment systems that support authentic learning and focus schoolwork on higher-order skills. This is the time for these efforts to redefine curriculum, instruction, assessment, and accountability as focused on the ability to apply meaningful learning in deep and transferable ways.

Given the shifts in schooling that will continue to occur, this is the time to reinvent educational practices so that teaching is guided by the [science of learning](#) and supported through high-quality opportunities for authentic learning and assessment that can support meaningful, relevant, and complex learning experiences in the classroom and virtually.

## Priority 7: Provide Expanded Learning Time

A critical approach to restarting and reinventing school is to provide expanded learning time (ELT) and opportunities for all students, with special attention paid to students with special education needs, students who are English learners, and students who have been disconnected during the pandemic. ELT is not just an add-on program, field trip, or enrichment opportunity; it complements the learning that takes place during the typical school day. To better structure and expand ELT, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Infuse high-quality tutoring within and beyond the school day.** There is a well-established literature on the [positive effects of tutoring](#), which can produce large gains that can be achieved [cost-effectively](#) both in-person and [virtually](#).
2. **Expand high-quality after-school programs.** [Research](#) shows that after-school extensions of learning time, when used well, can accelerate learning and reduce the opportunity gap. After-school learning opportunities are made more meaningful when they

align with the school's academic learning goals and incorporate meaningful activities that engage deeper learning pedagogies with content that is connected to students' cultural backgrounds and lives outside of school.

3. **Create high-quality summer programs.** States and districts should plan to provide ELT for students in summer 2021 and in future summers, when learning loss typically occurs. Well-designed summer programs have a purposeful curriculum, have stable staff, and are culturally relevant and engaging enough to stimulate consistent attendance; these programs are [most effective](#) when students experience them for multiple summers.
4. **Expand the reach and duration of early learning programs.** The gap in learning time between students from lower-income and upper-income families [begins in early childhood](#) and continues into k–12; therefore, one critical way to expand learning time for children is to ensure high-quality early learning. While some part-day programs have shown strong results, most of the [highly effective programs](#) are full-day.
5. **Enact policies and access funding to support expanded learning time.** States can use a variety of federal programs to support districts and schools to add instructional days to the calendar and extend the length of the school day to provide meaningful increases in learning time for students, including [multiple funding streams under the Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#), CARES Act funds, and [state-level funding](#).

By integrating ELT with existing school programs and making it culturally relevant for students and families, schools and districts can help counteract the negative impacts of the pandemic.

## Priority 8: Establish Community Schools and Wraparound Supports

[Community schools](#) offer a path forward to coordinate services for supporting children and families during this stressful time and have demonstrated their capacity to meet students' needs during the pandemic. To establish and expand community schools and wraparound supports, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Enact local policies that support well-designed community schools.** These policies should be grounded in [four evidence-based pillars](#): integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership practices.
2. **Enlist regional agencies that can provide technical assistance and help coordinate local services.** [Technical assistance](#) in this context includes the various supports needed to launch and sustain community school initiatives at scale, such as coordination of state and county services from multiple agencies, professional development and coaching for district and school staff, support for strategic planning, and partnership development that brings resources to schools (e.g., direct staffing, service provision, and funding).
3. **Create reliable funding streams to support community school needs.** State and local leaders can blend and braid [federal, state, and local funding streams](#) to provide integrated health, mental health, and social services alongside high-quality, supportive instruction in community schools.

4. **Create Children’s Cabinets at the federal, state, and county levels to coordinate, integrate, and streamline services across agencies.** Leaders at multiple levels can help enable more effective and efficiently provided resources for services to children and youth by creating a Children’s Cabinet or other vehicle to coordinate services at the top of the system so that they flow smoothly and seamlessly to districts and schools.

## Priority 9: Prepare Educators for Reinventing School

Everything described here requires knowledgeable, skilled, dedicated educators; there is no other way to get the kind of teaching we need. While the immediate needs of communities will create major pressures on budgets, it is important for policymakers to recognize how critically important it is to recruit, develop, and retain a strong educator workforce so that other aspirations for education for our children can be realized. The incentives needed to accomplish this reside at the federal, state, and local levels. To ensure that educators are prepared for the daunting work they undertake, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Invest in high-quality educator preparation, especially for high-need communities where shortages continue to be problematic.** High-quality programs begin with strong, research-aligned standards for teaching, which policymakers can update and strengthen to reflect the needs of today’s students. Policymakers can support high-retention strategies and pathways, including [service scholarships and loan forgiveness](#) programs, teacher and leader [residencies](#), and [Grow-Your-Own programs](#).
2. **Transform educator learning opportunities to match current needs.** Expectations of educators are higher than they have ever been. Educator preparation programs need more effective ways of developing and sharing expertise across the profession, such as through the [Educator Preparation Laboratory](#), collaboration to spread best practices for teacher and leader preparation across the profession, and strategies like [micro-credentialing](#), which may become increasingly important in identifying teaching experts in distance and blended learning, as well as other intensely needed skills.
3. **Support mentoring and new teacher roles.** Policymakers and school leaders can consider new teaching roles and arrangements that support novice teachers and address the health concerns of veteran teachers. This may include veteran teachers serving as virtual mentors for colleagues and new teachers; leveraging student teachers and paraprofessionals as members of teaching teams; and utilizing technology to increase professional expertise sharing, such as by [streaming lessons](#) offered by expert teachers and providing [job-embedded learning](#).
4. **Create collaboration time.** As many states and districts are thinking very differently about their use of time and are developing innovative teaching and learning schedules, a part of the new normal should include efforts to secure more [collaboration time](#) for teachers and opportunities for them to [work in teams](#).
5. **Take the long view.** Policymakers can also use this time to plan ahead to ensure that, as resources come back into the system, they are spent to leverage greater teaching expertise. States (and countries) that have made substantial gains and closed achievement gaps have made [systemic investments in educator quality](#). Preparation to make such investments can begin now, informed by the changing needs of today’s students and schools.



## Priority 10: Leverage More Adequate and Equitable School Funding

Even before COVID-19, most state education finance systems were not working for students from low-income families, students of color, and those with a range of needs. Without a determined effort to produce a different outcome, funding cuts made to education now could be as long-lasting as they were after the [Great Recession](#). To leverage more equitable funding, policymakers and educators can:

1. **Leverage federal funds for equity.** States and districts have an opportunity to use the funds provided through the CARES Act and any subsequent federal aid by making [strategic investments](#) that build local capacity to support all students—and especially the most marginalized—throughout the school year *and* in times of crisis.
2. **Adopt more equitable state school funding formulas.** States can seize the moment of the economic downturn to transform their funding systems to create new funding formulas that are designed to distribute funds more equitably as resources return to the system, as [California](#) and [Rhode Island](#) did during the Great Recession.
3. **Include preschool in funding formulas.** Policymakers can add preschool programs to school funding formulas. Even in the midst of recessions, state policymakers have added preschool through strategies such as the 10-year phase-in period used in [West Virginia](#).

Policymakers have the opportunity during economic downturns to redesign both federal aid and state and local funding systems to lead to increased educational equity over time.

## Conclusion

As states, districts, and schools prepare to restart and reinvent in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that we transform our ideas of school to match the demands of this historic moment. It is clear that returning to business as usual in education is not possible and that we must think of “school” in deeply different ways. Irrespective of the approach taken to instruction or the medium through which it takes place—online, in person, or a hybrid—policymakers and educators can take steps to ensure that all children, regardless of income and internet access, can participate in supportive and meaningful learning experiences. To accomplish this, our education system needs to transform our ideas of school to match the demands of this moment. Reinventing school means focusing on authentic learning and equity and harnessing the knowledge of human development, learning, and effective teaching accumulated over the last century and needed for the next.

The full report can be found online here: <https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org/>.