

COVID-19 EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES ROUNDTABLE SERIES SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction

Based on the public health necessity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, most U.S. schools closed their physical spaces in March 2020. Early evidence suggests that the closing of schools and migration to online learning has had harmful effects on children’s academic performance.¹ Research on so-called “summer loss”² and on recovery from natural disasters (e.g. Hurricane Katrina³) also shows that school disruption can slow academic progress and hamper social-emotional development of children. Moreover, the health crisis has surfaced for a broader public what many educators and policy makers have known for decades, namely growing disparities of resources and educational outcomes for historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and underserved students.⁴ Historic inequities make it all the more important to focus attention not only on the near-term needs of America’s 55 million public school students, but on whether and how the education system can continue the struggle for access and opportunity. The coincidence of COVID-19 with the overdue American reckoning with anti-Black violence and racism puts the current and ongoing educational challenge in stark relief.

Separating short-term resilience and crisis management from mending the cleavages that require sustained long-term tenacity creates a false dichotomy: the imperative is to maintain a steady vision of systemic overhaul even as preparations are made for the coming academic year. Immediate decisions need to be framed in such a way as to prevent a return to “normal” from becoming an excuse to abandon the quest for disturbing what has been for too many children an unfair and destructive “normal.”

The National Academy of Education (NAEd) convened groups of scholars, policy leaders, and educators to address the fundamental question: how do we address educational inequities in the face of the COVID-19 emergency, a challenge made even more urgent in the context of the resurgent American crisis of racial justice.

Over a two-week period in July 2020, experts in reading, mathematics, and well-being (the latter signifying our intent to include more than academic achievement in discussions of the sources and remedies for educational inequality) wrestled with the following six questions:⁵

1. What inequities in reading/mathematics/whole person well-being have been exacerbated by the pandemic?
2. What are the biggest challenges for addressing unfinished curricular learning⁶ in reading and mathematics instruction?
3. What strategies are you using/recommending/discussing that may be “best bets” for reading/mathematics learning?

4. What are the biggest challenges in addressing the effects of trauma on student well-being and social-emotional health with emphasis on the most vulnerable student groups?
5. For schools using different modes of learning, including in-person, online, and a hybrid, what strategies would you recommend for bolstering/supporting well-being through these different platforms?
6. If schools continue online learning, what are possible strategies for making the experience as successful as possible?

Challenges to Academic Learning and Social-Emotional Development

Although the American public school system has a history of resilience and responsiveness⁷, the education community was not prepared for a global pandemic that has so far infected five million Americans and caused the deaths of over 160,000. Indeed, the attempt at a “seamless transition” to home-based school learning came with many seams, varying substantially across our 15,000 districts and 130,000 schools. By and large, though, all schools and districts had to address technology issues including access to computers and other devices and wi-fi connectivity; their remarkable efforts notwithstanding, basic requirements for distance learning have not been met for all students.⁸

In addition, the drastically different mode of teaching required some districts to negotiate new terms with teacher unions; for example, what were the new requirements for teaching and how would the potential slowing of learning progress be accounted for fairly? As important, how would districts and schools that provide breakfast and lunch for their most vulnerable students address food insecurity and food delivery? These challenges, too, had the most severe impacts on disadvantaged and historically marginalized students.⁹

Since March 2020, with two crises – COVID-19 and the awakening for many Americans of ongoing racial injustice – the American education system as we know it has been disrupted and students’ academic and social-emotional learning have been affected. During the NAEEd discussions, practicing educators and researchers identified the following key concerns:

- **Structural impediments and uneven access to online learning**, including problems of technology and the need for new forms of family support;
- **Disruption in student engagement** with school leaders, teachers, and peers that may threaten mental well-being as well as academic engagement;
- **Limited and disrupted access to mental health supports**;
- **Difficulties in online learning for special populations**, particularly young children, children with disabilities and special learning needs, English learners, and students in home environments not conducive to online learning;
- **Barriers to effective communication with families and caregivers**, which cause additional stress on teachers and students;
- **Challenges to teachers and staff** necessitating additional professional development; and

- **Attending to well-being of teachers and staff** whose lives have been disrupted by the pandemic.

Takeaways: Messages and Advice

It would be presumptuous to suggest that the NAEd has “answers” to these daunting problems. However, it is possible to outline a set of “best bets,” i.e., strategies and action steps that are likely to advance the possibility for improved learning as the crisis continues – and beyond. This list is not meant as a “consensus” set of findings or recommendations, but rather as an invitation to continued research and deliberation. If there is a theme that is woven through these suggestions it may be best summarized in the words of Mathew Portell, principal at Fall Hamilton Enhanced Option School, Tennessee, quoted by one of the discussants in the NAEd sessions: “My biggest fear is that everything changes... and my second biggest fear is that nothing changes...”

Basic Necessities

1. **Ensure that children who would be provided with meals at school continue to receive food.**
2. **Reach families that the school has not had contact with since the outbreak of the pandemic ended in-person learning.**
3. **Ensure access to technology.**
4. **Focus on the social-emotional well-being of students and staff.**

Academic Learning

1. **Engage and collaborate with the entire school community to focus on learning.** This is a time to better integrate neighborhood resources, family, and schools to determine how to support children in greatest need. As home and communities continue to be settings for blended learning, this is the right time to reimagine how teachers can involve other stakeholders in conversation and collaboration about instructional quality.
2. **Recognize that the pandemic will continue to affect schools and school districts differently, and there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution.** Districts and schools need to be prepared to offer quality instruction in-person, online, and in hybrid learning environments, and as the presentation will vary across the country so will techniques and strategies vary. Specificities of districts and schools vary, and differences in demographics, language needs, special needs, technology availability, age, and other variables matter.
3. **Do not rush to address all unfinished curricular learning needs in academic year 2020-21.** It seems likely that for a majority of students, fulltime in-person schooling will not resume consistently during the 2020-21 school year. Efforts to accelerate learning and social-emotional

development should not focus on the 2020-21 school year but should include efforts spanning several school years.

4. **Begin curriculum planning by keeping in mind the assets, interests, curiosities, aspirations, and fears of students.** Schools need to ensure that students have agency and voice. Engage students by having their learning linked more closely to their lives and environments, including, for example, in this moment discussion of COVID-19, anti-Black racism, economic inequality, and climate change.
5. **Provide “grade-level content and instructional rigor.”** As suggested by the Council of the Great City Schools, districts and schools might be tempted to use assessments to identify “deficits” and then employ remediation approaches, and schools may be tempted to cover all unfinished topics in a shallow manner.¹⁰ *Neither remediation or shallow treatment of subjects should occur.* Rather, districts and schools should provide students with grade-level content with appropriate interventions, such as just-in-time interventions or differentiated supports, to address unfinished learning. Districts and schools should identify core concepts for use in teaching so that the focus is on depth and not breadth.
6. **Provide teachers with support, professional development, and professional learning communities.** Regardless of the environment in which teachers will return, they will need support and professional development to navigate unfinished learning, to deliver in online or hybrid models, and to address the social and emotional strains on students as well as their own persons, families, and communities. Professional development needs to include information that appropriately considers the ages of students. It also, in online and in-person environments, needs to enable teachers and staff to screen for and identify distress and trauma, and to express patience and caring and minimize bias in interactions.
7. **Recognize teachers’ efforts as they work to educate children through these challenging times.** Teachers should be honored as essential frontline workers and be provided with the equipment and tools to ensure their safety.
8. **Use formative assessments to further teaching and learning and provide effective, meaningful feedback to students.** Given the online learning environment and the varying level of difficulties students are facing, school districts should provide additional support and guidance to teachers for using formative assessments as teaching and learning tools. With waivers of mandated assessments in most states and

districts, the pandemic provides a unique opportunity to apply quality assessments that focus on student strengths.

Whole Person Well-Being

1. **Make the social-emotional and mental health needs of students and staff the top priority.** Whole person well-being is critical to academic and life success. When returning to schooling – in whatever form – the social, mental, and emotional health of our students must be thoughtfully and methodically addressed.
2. **Build social-emotional learning into the school curriculum for all students.** Social and emotional skills should be embedded in instruction and tied to academic competencies.
3. **Provide ongoing consultation to teachers and families on challenges that they are facing in responding to children’s needs.** Districts and schools should have counselors/social workers/psychologists available to help teachers and families address these needs.
4. **Provide group and individual sessions with mental health personnel (counselors, social workers, school psychologists) for students experiencing distress.** Equitable access to school-supported social, emotional, and mental health needs of students is necessary.
5. **Determine strategies for maintaining, strengthening, and developing relationships in a virtual environment.** For students returning to school virtually in the fall, teachers need to work to build, and in most cases develop, new relationships in largely unfamiliar environments. Teachers will need to build a new skill set in order to develop relationships and assist with peer relationships in virtual environments.

List of Useful Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2020). [COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry](#).

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020). [Reunite, Renew and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School](#).

Council of Chief State School Officers. (2020).

- [Restart & Recovery: Considerations for Teaching & Learning Overview](#).
- [Restart & Recovery: Serving English Language Learners During COVID-19](#).

Council of the Great City Schools. (2020).

- [Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#).
- [Addressing Mental Health and Social-Emotional Wellness in the COVID-19 Crisis: A Resource Guide for School Districts](#).

eSchool+ Initiative. (2020). [Resources for Reopening Schools](#). The Johns Hopkins University.

Kelly, M. S., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G., & Watson, K. R. (2020). UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Social Work.

- [Opening Schools Safely in the COVID-19 Era: School Social Workers' Experiences and Recommendations Technical Report](#).
- [Opening Schools Safely in the COVID-19 Era: School Social Workers' Experiences and Recommendations, Policy Brief](#).

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2020). [Reopening K-12 Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Prioritizing Health, Equity, and Communities](#). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25858>.

National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (June 2020). [Moving Forward: Mathematics Learning in the Era of COVID-19](#).

Stand for Children Leadership Center. (2020). [Preventing a Lost School Year: The Crucial Importance of Motivating Students & Engaging Families](#).

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Panelists

Addressing Inequitable Reading Loss in the Midst of COVID-19: Mitigation and Learning Acceleration Strategies

Tuesday, July 7, 2020

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Addressing Inequitable Mathematics Loss in the Midst of COVID-19: Mitigation and Learning Acceleration Strategies

Thursday, July 9, 2020

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Fostering Student Well-Being in the Era of COVID-19

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Endnotes

- ¹ Dorn, E. Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020, Jun. 1). COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>; Kuhfeld, M. & Tarasawa, B. (2020). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement. NWEA Research. Retrieved from: <https://www.nwea.org/research/publication/the-covid-19-slide-what-summer-learning-loss-can-tell-us-about-the-potential-impact-of-school-closures-on-student-academic-achievement/>; World Bank Group (2020). *Simulating the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on schooling and learning outcomes: A set of global estimates*. Retrieved from: <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/798061592482682799/covid-and-education-june17-r6.pdf>
- ² Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Olson, L. S. (2007). Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72(2), 167–180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200202>
- ³ Sacerdote, B., (2012). When the Saints go marching out: Long-term outcomes for student evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 4(1), 109-35; Harris, D. N., & Larsen, M. F. (2018). “The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina Market-Based School Reforms on Student Achievement, High School Graduation, and College Outcomes.” Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.
- ⁴ Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (Eds.) (2011). *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children’s life chances*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Darling-Hammond, L. (2001). Inequality in Teaching and Schooling: How Opportunity Is Rationed to Students of Color in America. *The Right Thing to Do, The Smart Thing to Do: Enhancing Diversity in Health Professions -- Summary of the Symposium on Diversity in Health Professions in Honor of Herbert W. Nickens, M.D.*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/10186>.
- ⁵ Participants and their biographical information can be found at the end of this document.
- ⁶ Curricular learning refers to subjects learned through a school-based course of study, in contrast to informal learning.
- ⁷ Cremin, L. A. (1990). *Popular education and its discontents*. New York: Harper & Row; Goldin, C and L. Katz (2008). *The Race Between Education and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- ⁸ Auxier, B., and Anderson, M. (2020). As schools close due to the coronavirus, some U.S. students face a digital ‘homework gap’. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/16/as-schools-close-due-to-the-coronavirus-some-u-s-students-face-a-digital-homework-gap/>; Herold, B. (2020, Apr. 10). The disparities in remote learning under coronavirus (in charts). *Education Week*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/the-disparities-in-remote-learning-under-coronavirus.html>; Romm, Tony. (March, 2020). ‘It shouldn’t take a pandemic’: Coronavirus exposes Internet inequality among U.S. students as schools close their doors. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/16/schools-internet-inequality-coronavirus/>.
- ⁹ Rothstein, R. (2020, Apr. 14). The coronavirus will explode achievement gaps in education. *Economic Policy Institute*. Retrieved from: <https://www.epi.org/blog/the-coronavirus-will-explode-achievement-gaps-in-education/>; Dorn, E. Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020, Jun. 1). COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>; Goldstein, Dana. (June 5, 2020). Research Shows Students Falling Months Behind During Virus Disruptions. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/coronavirus-education-lost-learning.html>
- ¹⁰ Council of the Great City Schools. (June 2020). Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures. Retrieved from: https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/313/CGCS_Unfinished%20Learning.pdf.

Additional Information

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