



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

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## EDUCATION & SOCIETY PROGRAM

# RECOVERY AND RENEWAL: PRINCIPLES FOR ADVANCING PUBLIC EDUCATION POST-CRISIS

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The coronavirus pandemic has upended every aspect of society: how we work, shop, worship, travel, care for each other, and bury our dead. And no sector has been more upended – perhaps with multigenerational impacts – than the school year for America’s 50 million students. Some are logging in from parking lots,<sup>1</sup> waiting in line<sup>2</sup> for food, seeking devices to access the internet,<sup>3</sup> balancing care for siblings<sup>4</sup> with school work, and some are navigating a tragic rise in child abuse.<sup>5</sup> Other young people report appreciation for the extra time at home, help from family, and limitless snacks.<sup>6</sup> These circumstances shine an intense light upon the inequities that have long existed in our education system. How we choose to respond will determine whether young people and families rebound or fall further behind.

Amidst near-constant debate of when and how to reopen the economy, it remains unclear what are the plans for reopening schools, and who is participating in their design? As education and policy leaders begin to make key decisions, we need a shared set of principles for developing and evaluating education policy in response to the COVID-19 crisis that:

- is centered on equity in both content and process,
- takes a holistic and coherent approach,
- is aligned with science,
- is oriented toward a long-term vision for student success, and
- embeds an Innovation and Learning Agenda

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## This is a Moment of Reckoning for Public Education – and America

The crisis already is revealing a lot about where we are as a country and an education sector: We've seen heroic dedication from educators and school food-service workers who were first responders in this pandemic,<sup>7</sup> demonstrating how society relies on schools for much more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition to academic learning and food, schools provide safety, healthcare, and mental health services; communication, coping and time management skills; and nurturing relationships that are key to thriving as children and adults. Sadly, we've also seen how levels of inequality and insecurity historically imposed on children make a mockery of equal opportunity: Those who were behind are falling further behind; the digital divide is not just real it's a travesty, meaning even the ability to stay in touch with students varies dramatically based on where they live.

The gravity and complexity of this moment are intensified by historic shifts already underway before the pandemic: after broad political support for the last 35 years, waning support for the assessment-and-accountability reform agenda, the devolution of federal authority to states, and increasingly politicized debates about the meaning of equity already were creating a perfect storm for education policy. The social contract that public schools represent is overdue for renewal. Public education now needs to be re-envisioned in ways that meet the emergency while also setting a course that improves on the status quo. "Education will never go back to the way it was before the crisis" is a common refrain, but public education is extraordinary in its resistance to change, so we should not be naïve about receptivity to innovation or the system's inclination to snap back to prior practice even when change is urgently needed and broadly desired.

We've become accustomed to operating in a low-trust environment in education, which hampers our ability to accomplish great things. The challenge – and opportunity – of reopening public schools calls on all of us to clarify the principles and enduring values we want to live by, and use these to build common ground where we can. Establishing shared principles creates a context for productive debates and better decisions on contentious issues, even as disagreements endure on the right course of action. As policymakers and advocates endeavor to navigate public education toward a better future for young people and our country, the following five principles should guide decisions:

## I. Ensure Equity and Engagement

Consensus has rapidly emerged about this crisis in the context of equity:

- More than half of all the students in public education rely on schools for free or subsidized meals,<sup>8</sup> and with record numbers of unemployment claims, food insecurity will become even more acute through the economic downturn unless policymakers act to address it.
- The shift to distance learning highlights the digital divide; students from low-income families, students in rural communities, and students of color are much less likely to have internet access<sup>9</sup> and a device on which to learn, or a quiet and safe space for schoolwork.
- The stress and trauma of closures are not evenly distributed because students from low-income families and students of color are much more likely to have parents who can't work from home or who have lost their jobs, so they are more likely to be in financial distress.
- More harrowing, schools are often the first to alert child welfare authorities in cases of suspected neglect and abuse. Much of this will go undetected during distance learning, even though child abuse and domestic violence are probably exacerbated<sup>10</sup> by increased stress, uncertainty, and loss of income experienced during stay-at-home orders.

But policymakers must be clear-eyed that *the inequities described above are replicated and exacerbated by previously existing inequity inside of school*. Every powerful driver of learning is provided to white and affluent students more than students of color and students from low-income families: learning environments that are safe, nurturing, and foster belonging; academic content that is rigorous and relevant; teaching staff who see and value students' cultures and communities. Going back to the status quo ante would leave many students and communities without what they need educationally. Any response must also include a renewal in our promise to provide equal opportunities to learn and thrive.

Equity is about providing resources relative to need, but it is also about *who decides*. Education reform, for all its accomplishments, often alienated schools from communities, as education leaders were rewarded for allegiance to goals and strategies that emanated from far away. While it is vital to value expertise and knowledge from research, solutions that are effective and advance equity in education are highly context-specific and give as much regard to the lived experiences, values, and choices of

families and local leaders. So policymakers need to ask: *Are those who are most directly affected at the table when decisions are made, which issues are best decided by state policy vs. those left to local leaders, and ultimately – when the state decides for everyone, does it advance the interests of those furthest from opportunity?* Their answer must be to include the voices of parents and students<sup>11</sup> in plans to reopen and re-imagine schools.

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## 2. Take a Holistic View to Set a Coherent Strategy

Momentous decisions need to be taken over the coming year – starting now and continuing through the 2020-21 state legislative sessions. Schools and students are not silos of policy and practice. State leaders need to see all the issues together so they can relate specific decisions to the whole. If every issue is treated serially, on its own and by level of urgency, decisions made by different divisions and different levels of government won't be aligned, and school leaders will be left to sort out the confusion. State leaders in Maryland,<sup>12</sup> New York,<sup>13</sup> Tennessee<sup>14</sup> have already indicated they'll be reining in previous plans to grow education spending and others are likely to follow as state budgets are going to be under immense strain over the next few years. Given this, early decisions will set priorities and constrain the range of options available

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even a few months later, which makes it especially important to devise a strategy for ensuring coherence among different decisions.

We only need look to the 2009 stimulus for examples of incoherent policy from which to learn. School systems were instructed to use stimulus funds to stem job loss *and* exhorted to use the same money to advance reform, without guidance on how to reconcile the inherent tension. Race to the

Top winners were required to introduce tougher academic standards and tests -- and insert scores from the new, tougher tests into teacher evaluations *at the same time*; this policy directive was then applied to almost every state through NCLB waivers. The collision of these policies created substantive and political challenges – ultimately leading to testing opt-outs among progressives, vilifying Common Core among conservatives, and an accountability backlash that still simmers. The strain this time is more likely to relate to the prioritization and sequencing of social-emotional vs. academic supports and increased technology needed to support distance learning, but the danger of incoherence, competing timelines, and mixed messages to the field are as acute as ever.

Coherence also requires coordinating efforts across all youth-serving public agencies and community partners who support youth development. The needs of young people in getting through and beyond this crisis are too great for schools, or any single entity, to handle on its own. There will not be enough money or human capacity to afford duplication of efforts, or operating in silos. State children's cabinets<sup>15</sup> and city-wide leadership<sup>16</sup> will be critical in coordinating care and marshaling resources efficiently to help students recover, and thrive.

The governors, state education chiefs, legislators, and state board of education members – as well leaders in other youth-serving agencies and early and higher education – need a coordinated, multi-agency response and clarity regarding respective roles among state actors and between state vs. local leaders – a through-line with the clear and achievable destination of student success.



## 3. Ground the Work in the Science of Learning

We know so much more about how people learn than we did 20 years ago, creating actionable insights that are especially relevant right now.

Academics are and should remain primary to the work of schools; there is also an unwritten yet just as vital curriculum running alongside and through core subjects, as students observe what behavior is modeled, conjure their own understanding of society's values as expressed in schools; and practice taking their place in the world outside of home. These dynamics profoundly influence students' engagement and investment in learning.

As we are forced to think about what should change and what should stay the same, basic science on human development and learning should be brought to bear on what's most important to success in school and in life. Four findings stand out as especially applicable to supporting students during school closures, and re-engaging students (and faculty) when buildings are able to reopen:

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- Student safety, belonging, and connectedness to school – through relationships with teachers and other students – are foundational to resilience and engagement that then enable academic success and thriving in life.<sup>17</sup> There is a sequence akin to Maslow's hierarchy of need and we cannot skip steps. Trying to focus too narrowly on making up for lost instructional time will compound inequity and depress long-term achievement if done without adequately resourcing the basic needs of psychological safety, relationships, and restoring a sense of belonging in the community of school. Prioritizing school relationships and connectedness now, like Phoenix Union High School District's "Every Student, Every Day"<sup>18</sup> initiative, which is mobilizing every adult in the system – including the superintendent – to be a consistent, daily source of support for approximately 10 students.
- Schools' have differential impact on students' willingness to engage in school, work hard, and follow the rules. Research pioneered by Northwestern University professor Kirabo Jackson demonstrates that schools have even more influence on affective dimensions of success than on academic measures<sup>19</sup> – and that improving students' work habits and social skills are much more predictive than test scores of students earning better grades, graduating from high school, and going to college. School quality measures need to count school climate and schools' ability to get students to show up, work hard, and engage with peers. Chicago Public Schools uses a school-climate survey to improve student engagement and student learning,<sup>20</sup> enabling Chicago students to demonstrate greater growth in grades 3-8 than students in any other large system in the country, according to a prominent study from Stanford University.<sup>21</sup>
- Adolescence is a period of major brain development, second only to early childhood. According to the National Academy of Sciences, "[I]earning how to make decisions and to take responsibility for shaping one's own life are key developmental tasks of adolescence."<sup>22</sup> Adolescents respond to different types of teaching and learning; in important ways, adolescents need the opposite of what works for younger children and what they're currently getting in school (which is why more than half of high school students already think of school as irrelevant<sup>23</sup> – and that's among those who are still in school). Rather than treating adolescents as older children, we need to see and treat them as emerging adults -- and their school experience needs to shift toward authentic, developmental experiences and entry into the world through community

service and internships/apprenticeships, ideally through structured pathways that build social capital and lead to living-wage work when completed. EL Education maintains the world's largest collection of meaningful student work,<sup>24</sup> featuring projects that promote critical thinking, creativity, and craftsmanship.

- Experiencing trauma and excessive stress generates predictable physiological and psychological manifestations that undermine learning and overall well-being. While most children and adults will experience high levels of stress at some point throughout the COVID-19 ordeal, some children are much more vulnerable because of the relative lack of safety and stability prior to the pandemic and the dislocation it is causing. Fortunately, a tremendous amount is known about mitigating the impact of trauma and stress,<sup>25</sup> but the science also explains that, left unaddressed, stress and trauma become toxic in ways that undermine well-being and engagement in learning. In partnership with Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, Edutopia produced a set of videos that connect the science with promising practices,<sup>26</sup> like what's happening in DC's Van Ness Elementary School.<sup>27</sup> To re-engage students successfully, schools need resources and guidance to assess student wellness and provide intensive supports to students who experienced the greatest adversity during the closures.



#### 4. Take a Long-term View of Student Success

The current moment cannot be defined only by responding to the pandemic. *Even before the crisis*, profound questions were on the table about the role of education in society, and what education outcomes are most important for students to be ready to thrive as adults and become contributing members of society. Lackluster results over the last two decades<sup>28</sup> should push all of us to re-think the purpose of education. If policymakers don't focus *now* on orienting education toward the future, policies that had outlived their usefulness before the crisis will be extended in the rush to "return to normal."

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Three dynamics are especially important to address alongside efforts to get students back into school:

- **Future of Work** puts a premium on adaptability, teamwork, communicating across lines of difference, and developing creative solutions to novel problems;
- **Health of Democracy** puts a premium on civil discourse, critically assessing the source of information and a willingness to consider divergent perspectives and evidence, an ethical orientation, and a cultivation of civic virtues.
- **A Robust Conception of Equity** puts a premium on developing students' agency as actors not merely objects of others' plans, developing healthy self-identity, and preparing each young person to take their place as members of American society and their communities while respecting diversity and honoring pluralism.

Each of these forces is reshaping the world that young Americans are graduating into, now exacerbated by the post-pandemic economy. Leaders must capitalize on the attributes of education that can meet all three: Failing to address any one will inhibit progress on the others, and if all three are pursued seriously but separately, it will overwhelm schools' capacity for positive change. Schools had not oriented adequately toward these dynamics before the crisis; we will do untold damage to young people and society if we don't heed these imperatives as we design the next generation of education practice and policy.



### 5. Embed an Innovation and Learning Agenda

The magnitude of change in both scale and pace already may have no precedent since the advent of public education. What's to come in the next year or two can arguably be expected to push us even further into new territory. It must be true that in some ways education will never be the same again, but will it be better or worse, in what ways and for whom?

Productive innovation will surely come out of necessity, out of the fierce urgency of now. To learn rapidly, the education sector has to be proactive in capturing what is being tried. Gleaning lessons from failed attempts must be valued just as much as scaling success. The capacity to document, study, and disseminate knowledge regarding education practice has never been more sophisticated -- or more important. But this work is too dynamic and too important to be left to academics alone: States need to activate and engage educators, students, and families as participant-researchers, to work in concert with scholars and the research community to create new insights. All these stakeholders deserve an active role in deciding the future.

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Respecting rigorous research principles while also honoring local, contextualized knowledge requires shifts in how we go about generating research questions and findings. The research agenda produced by the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development outlined a new paradigm for practice-informed, useful research,<sup>29</sup> providing a blueprint for pursuing the pragmatic questions practitioners need to answer.

Starting now, states should track innovations and emergency response measures, both official decisions and what actually happens when put into practice; determine the most important questions to explore by first asking students and parents what's most important to them, and organize working groups to learn quickly and adapt policy and practice decisions going forward. Empanel students and parents as part of the steering committee for these efforts. Value the unique insights they bring to the process, and compensate them for their time (everyone else on the steering committee likely is being paid for their time spent). Publish and share what is learned.

## Answering the Call

We are called by this moment to move beyond the Jeffersonian vision that spawned public education in our nation as a “general diffusion of knowledge.” Rather, we must emerge from isolation focused on Dr. King’s insight that we are all, every member of society, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”

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***- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.***

This period of physical distancing reminds us that public education is profoundly about belonging. Throughout their academic studies, students also learning how to take their place in the community, with school as prelude and practice for participating in society at-large. It is the promise we make to each other that every one of us has an ownership stake in America, that we each deserve the chance to act on our ambitions and abilities; this is the social contract that public education represents. Response must be matched with renewal to meet the mission of public education. It is no exaggeration to say the future of America depends on it.



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