Helping K–12 Students Recover from the Pandemic
This post is part of a series reflecting on California's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit California's schools hard over the past two years, exacerbating longstanding inequities in academic outcomes and student well-being. The slower pace of learning during distance and hybrid instruction means that educational recovery will require long-term efforts. The good news is that there are now more state and federal resources available than in years past. And as of March 2022, in-person learning has returned, vaccinations are widely available for school-aged children, case rates and hospitalizations are low, and mask mandates are starting to lift in some districts.

California’s K–12 system is making up for lost time for all students, but especially for English Learners (ELs), students with disabilities, and students from low-income families who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. These students often experienced the greatest disruptions during the pandemic.

To help students catch up, there is an unprecedented amount of funding both from the state's funding formula and from supplemental recovery
dollars. After decades of spending less per student than most other states, California’s K–12 spending surpassed the national average in 2018-19. Because of the state’s commitment to reducing inequality in educational outcomes, districts with higher percentages of ELs and low-income students receive proportionally more funding.

Record funding levels are a boon to the system and have been essential to district reopening and recovery plans. However, there are several issues to keep in mind:

- Most of the stimulus dollars expire in 2023 or 2024, and their one-time nature might limit districts’ abilities to implement recovery strategies that could produce long-lasting changes in schools and classrooms (e.g., hiring staff or raising salaries).
- Many high-need students are in districts of moderate need that do not receive as much additional funding, even though these students would also benefit from higher funding levels.
- The state’s funding formula increases funding for high-need students, but this additional funding is not fully targeted to the high-need students and school sites that generate it.
- State revenue, and thus education funding, is dependent in large part on personal income taxes, which have been very high during the pandemic. But this is a volatile revenue stream. The state is only a decade removed from multi-year cuts to education funding precipitated by the Great Recession.
- Without requiring evaluation of how federal and state funding will be used, it will be hard to understand which district policies are doing the most good—and even harder to amplify and scale those practices across the state.

Taken together, these factors make it difficult to immediately translate increased resources into improved student performance and reduced educational disparities. Policymakers should continue to carefully monitor these fiscal challenges to ensure that the educational recovery is as effective and equitable as possible.
How will this funding be used? These are some of the efforts underway to promote an equitable educational recovery:

- **Health and safety.** The pandemic has highlighted the need for school facilities that protect the health of students and staff. Beyond PPE, testing, and contact tracing, schools are investing in air filtration and ventilation, building repair and renovation, and other capital improvements.

- **School meals.** When in-person learning halted in spring 2020, access to school meals raised immediate challenges, especially as economic insecurity increased for many families. Many districts quickly devised ways to distribute food to families, with some even creating their own delivery routes. Federal waivers allow schools to offer free meals to all students through the end of the 2021–22 school year. Starting in 2022–23, California will start implementing its universal school meals programs—the first in the nation.

- **Mental health.** Student mental health took a big hit during the pandemic, but districts throughout the state have identified this as a priority and have new funding to address it. However, finding qualified professionals to hire is a continuing challenge, and staffing shortages are not limited to the mental health space.

- **Digital divide.** The digital divide was a key driver of inequality, as low-income students were less likely to have access to a digital device and the internet early in the pandemic. Device access increased relatively quickly, but despite the distributions of devices such as hot spots challenges with internet access persist. Federal and state resources should help expand affordable broadband for all Californians. And digital innovations in teaching and learning, developed out of necessity during the pandemic, could lead to long-lasting changes in instructional methods.

- **Declining enrollment.** K–12 enrollment was already declining pre-pandemic, but the pandemic accelerated this trend, especially for younger students and low-income students, who were less likely than older students to participate in remote instruction. In addition, chronic absences during the 2021–22 school year are alarming and have led
policymakers and educators to reconsider the current school funding method, which relies on average daily attendance.

**Early learning.** California is rapidly increasing investments in early childhood education, and by 2025–26 will have expanded the K–12 system to include an additional year—the Transitional Kindergarten year—for all four-year-olds. Giving all students, but especially ELs, students with disabilities, and low-income students, an earlier start could go a long way toward reducing the inequitable outcomes we see at older ages.

As we begin the third year of the pandemic, unprecedented state and federal resources can help educators and students recover from the pandemic and tackle widening learning gaps. These two questions should guide the state and districts going forward: (1) How can we maximize the effectiveness of these resources, closing gaps and reducing the entrenched inequities in the education system? (2) How do we promote a more resilient education system that is prepared for any future disruptions?
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