

Lead with Equity

What California's Leaders Must Do Next to Advance Student Learning During COVID-19

Heather Hough
Jennifer O'Day
Carrie Hahnel
Arun Ramanathan
Christopher Edley, Jr.
Maria Echaveste



On July 17th, 2020, Governor Newsom announced that all K–12 schools in California counties with rising COVID-19 infections would be required to teach remotely. Without a strong focus on improving the quality of remote education at scale, students could lose up to a year's worth of learning, and as many as 1.1 million students could fail to graduate high school. That academic impact would be felt most acutely by low-income, Black, and Latinx students. California's leaders must act now to prioritize equity and ensure quality across all of the state's districts. New policies do establish baseline statewide teaching and learning requirements, but these expectations can be strengthened. State leaders must ensure adequate monitoring, support, and resources, all with deep attention to equity. Absent these things, we can expect to see even more troubling differences in opportunity and achievement arise among districts, schools, and groups of students.

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Introduction

When schools reopen for the 2020–21 school year, they will look dramatically different than before the pandemic. Whether in person, online, or some combination of the two, it will be critical that each student receives rigorous instruction and the academic, social, and emotional support needed to thrive. That would be a far cry from the emergency education most districts offered in the spring.

Data reveal wide variation in how distance learning was implemented.¹ Each district, school, classroom, and student group experienced something different because of students' varied access to computers and Wi-Fi; differences in local decisions about what curriculum to use and how much instruction to provide; differences in the speed with which districts ramped up their virtual learning; and differences in efforts to meet the needs of English learners (ELs), students with disabilities, students who were behind academically, and students with fewer supports at home.² Nationally, only one in five districts delivered rigorous distance instruction.³ In California, English learners and students of color were far less likely to have the opportunity to interact directly with teachers.⁴ This is particularly troubling in a state where 1.15 million students are ELs, representing one out of every three ELs in the country,⁵ and where more than three quarters of students are students of color.⁶

When students return to school, our state's expectations for instruction should be far higher. California leaders must prioritize equity and ensure quality across the state's roughly 1,000 school districts. The implications, otherwise, could be dire. McKinsey and Company recently warned that if low-quality remote learning continues in 2020–21, students could lose up to a year's worth of learning and high school dropouts could increase by as many as 1.1 million students.⁷ That academic slide will be felt most acutely by low-income, Black, and Latinx students.

Our Research Approach

To identify the most important things the state could do, we:

- reviewed school reopening guidance, recommendations, and frameworks from state and national agencies and organizations (**see Appendix**);
- talked with current and former district superintendents and education experts;
- reviewed letters and testimony from school districts, associations, and advocates;
- reviewed literature for lessons learned from the distance learning that took place during spring 2020 and the appropriate balance of state and local control; and
- focused on the state role as part of a multiday convening on school reopening with the California Collaborative for District Reform (a learning community of district superintendents and other key leaders).

They have been the ones least likely to get a high-quality education both before and during the pandemic. Further, the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected their families.⁸ In 2020–21, these and other vulnerable students must receive good instruction, regular interactions with teachers, and supports that address their academic, psychological, and social-emotional needs.⁹

New state policies provide some much-needed guardrails by establishing baseline statewide requirements related to teaching and learning.¹⁰ However, these expectations can be strengthened and by themselves are not enough. Next, state leaders must ensure adequate monitoring, support, and resources, all with deep attention to equity. Absent those things, we can expect to see even more troubling differences in opportunity and achievement arise between districts, schools, and groups of students.

No doubt, civil rights and education equity advocates will continue to monitor the situation and will respond to inequities in how student groups are served. To get ahead of this and strengthen assurances regarding quality and equity, the legislature and governor must work in close coordination with the California Department of Education (CDE); the State Board of Education; the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence; California’s higher education, health, and welfare systems; statewide associations; labor partners; and a broad range of state and local advocacy groups including those representing students and parents.

This brief provides recommendations to policymakers on the appropriate state role in supporting teaching and learning as the pandemic continues, calling on the state to:

1. establish a small number of **clear requirements** related to teaching and learning, **monitor their implementation**, and **provide support** to districts to help them address students’ academic, social, and emotional needs;
2. extend districts’ **key flexibilities, consistent with equity imperatives**, so districts can efficiently, effectively, and creatively serve students; and
3. play a leadership role in securing **more funding**.

Before discussing these recommendations, we briefly review what the state has done so far in regard to school reopening and why it is so critically important to strengthen continually state leadership on this issue.

The Appropriate Role for State Policy

When the pandemic first swept through California in March 2020, Governor Newsom acted quickly to loosen restrictions on schools and districts, allowing them to pivot to different modes of learning without fear that they would lose funding or be held accountable for things over which they had no control.¹¹ Then, the state largely limited its role during the spring to

issuing guidance and support. The CDE convened several task forces¹² and issued guidance in June 2020 to inform local decisions on school reopening.¹³ In presenting the document, CDE officials emphasized that the guidance is just that—guidance—and that each district will make its own plans and decisions. The agency offered itself as a resource.

This approach is in keeping with the logic of “local control” and the goal of the Statewide System of Support, which is to provide customized assistance to districts through a multiagency effort. Even before the pandemic, however, this fledgling system lacked capacity to address the myriad needs of local districts.¹⁴ As a result, districts have largely been left to figure out the details of distance learning on their own. District leaders, advocates, and parent groups have since requested greater clarity and support.¹⁵

In response, the governor and California legislature established stronger expectations for instruction in the 2020–21 budget bill.¹⁶ In addition to maintaining state funding and providing federal funds to address learning loss, the bill requires that districts continue to provide 180 days of instruction per year, strongly encourages in-person instruction when safe and interactive instruction when remote, sets minimum expectations for instructional minutes, and requires learning continuity and attendance plans. In mid-July, the governor provided further clarity regarding how local decisions about school openings and closures should be made.¹⁷

In setting these “guardrails,” the state creates clear expectations for what all districts must do and reduces the likelihood of variability across districts. It also provides some helpful parameters for local labor negotiations and may help head off litigation at the local level. At the same time, there is ample regulatory and statutory looseness around how districts implement requirements and best serve their students and communities.

However, setting expectations is only the first step. Next, the state must work to ensure that these expectations are met and that they are implemented equitably. By providing firm direction, monitoring, and support, state policymakers have the opportunity to advance educational quality and equity, promote public safety, establish transparency and trust, and create efficiency. Each of these ideas is briefly discussed below.

Quality and Equity

By setting unambiguous statewide expectations, state leaders make clear the minimum level of academic, social, and emotional services that should be provided across all districts and to all students. The state is also charged with ensuring that schools and districts provide students with equitable opportunities to succeed.¹⁸ This must include:

- Aligning resources so that each student is supported academically, socially, and emotionally according to their level of need. That should encompass directing more funding to higher need districts and requiring that districts provide more instructional services and social and emotional support to marginalized students.

- Establishing safeguards so that there are not disparities in the opportunities and services provided to students of color, low-income students, English learners, students with disabilities, students who are immunocompromised, students experiencing homelessness, and other vulnerable student groups. That may mean requiring that student needs rather than parent choice alone drive decisions about which students are prioritized for in-person instruction or one-on-one supports.
- Mitigating the structural and institutional effects of disadvantage that are affecting some groups more than others during this health and economic crisis, particularly Black and Latinx communities. That should include investing in counseling rather than policing; positive behavioral supports; race-conscious teaching and leadership practices; food and housing supports for families that need them; mental health services; and inclusive family engagement practices.

Public Safety

Clear, well-coordinated leadership at the state level will help ensure not only consistency and minimum standards for educational quality but also public safety. COVID-19 has no regard for school district boundaries, instead affecting whole regions at a time. The state's public health response has recognized this by providing some statewide mandates (masks, for example) and data-driven criteria for a four-stage reopening of retail stores, restaurants, offices, and other services, while also ensuring a measure of local flexibility at the county level.¹⁹

In recognition of the fact that at least the same should be true when it comes to the reopening of schools, the governor's July 17 guidance requires that school district leaders follow clear, data-driven guidelines from the state and their county health offices when making decisions about when and how to reopen. This will ensure that local health conditions consistently inform decisions about the physical reopening of schools and the safety measures that must be in place. Going forward, similarly objective statewide requirements should continue to inform county- and district-level decisions.²⁰

Public Transparency and Trust

In a time of so much uncertainty, families, teachers, and students want and deserve to know the basic parameters for education in the coming year. These stakeholders, especially parents who depend on our school systems so they can work, want to know what they can expect and demand of school district leaders and educators,²¹ and students and families want to know how they can be involved. By setting clear statewide expectations and requiring that stakeholders be involved in school planning, the state has an opportunity to deepen trust and confidence in our public education systems. In particular, the state should require that districts engage families of historically marginalized students—including families of low-income students, English learners, and students of color—and demonstrate how it is ensuring that the opinions and preferences of privileged families do not drown out and disproportionately influence district reopening plans.

Efficiency, Scale, and Leverage

Finally, the state also should use its authority to take leadership when it can create economies of scale and when it is the only entity that can accomplish a given task. For example, the state is the main entity that can push for interagency collaboration, secure access to large volumes of personal protective equipment at the best price, and create major new policy initiatives like universal free Wi-Fi. The state is also best positioned to advocate for federal money.

State leaders also have the ability to set a statewide learning agenda, so that policymakers and stakeholders can capture data about and learn from the instruction that takes place this year. Importantly, the state also has the power of the bully pulpit. Individuals like the governor and the superintendent of public instruction are uniquely positioned to set the tone for what schooling must look like during this pandemic and to model the importance of leading with principles of equity and racial justice.

Critical State Requirements, Monitoring, and Support Related to Teaching, Learning, and Social and Emotional Health

State policymakers, including the governor, legislators, the superintendent of public instruction, and State Board of Education members, should collectively convey what they **expect and require** when it comes to teaching and learning over the coming year and perhaps longer. Building from the baseline instructional expectations adopted by the legislature and the nonbinding guidance and recommendations issued by the CDE, they should provide clear mechanisms for ensuring that every school and district is **supporting students' academic, social, and emotional health needs**. Specifically, the state should:

1. Ensure Each Student Receives a Minimum Amount of Interactive, Real-Time Instruction, and That Additional Support, Whether Virtual or in Person, Is Prioritized for The Most Vulnerable

The legislature has appropriately adopted minimum instructional minutes, by grade level, for 2020–21 school year.²² This may help minimize the huge variances in instructional time delivered this spring. However, the law effectively allows districts to meet these minimum expectations largely through assignments alone, without clear requirements regarding how much or how often teachers must interact with students in real time, or “synchronously.” While the new legislation does specify that each student should receive “live interaction” each day when “feasible,” further specification is needed. All students, particularly the most vulnerable, need meaningful interaction with peers and regular, individualized feedback to support and accelerate their learning. The state should require that every student, even those enrolled in fully remote options, receive daily, real-time, one-on-one or small-group instruction or support designed to address their individual learning needs, with the amount of live instructional minutes increasing

with student need.²³ The state should also clarify that synchronous but noninteractive tasks such as listening to lectures, watching videos, or working independently, while useful instructional tools, should not be considered “live instruction.”

The state should also ensure that low-income students, English learners, special education students, students of color, and students who have fallen behind during school closures receive additional and targeted supports so that they can fully participate and engage in learning. Even districts offering fully remote instruction should find ways to offer limited in-person support to students who cannot learn well remotely, such as very young children or those with special needs, unsafe living conditions, poor internet connectivity, or limited family support at home. The state can help achieve this by requiring that districts describe in their learning continuity and attendance plans how they will prioritize interactive instructional time for vulnerable students, whether in person or virtual, and then pairing that requirement with support and oversight.

2. Establish Monitoring, Oversight, and Improvement Processes to Ensure Full and Equitable Participation and Access to Instruction

To strengthen assurances that adequate and high-quality instructional time, meaningful reengagement practices, and equitable services are provided, the state should: (a) authorize counties to reject or help revise districts’ instructional continuity plans where needed; (b) require districts to collect local data and regularly update their communities on the implementation of these plans, including data on how much synchronous instructional time each group of students is receiving and on rates of participation; (c) ensure that districts provide families—especially parents of students receiving special education services—avenues for offering feedback, participating in decision-making, and escalating concerns; (d) establish oversight processes to document rates of participation in different instructional modalities by student group, and help districts correct any disparities in student participation, unless that disparity is clearly an effort to advance equity by matching instruction to student needs; and (e) consider a statewide evaluation or audit to document trends in instruction and student engagement so that policymakers and stakeholders have good information upon which to base future decisions.

3. Require That Districts Assess Achievement and Monitor Learning During the Pandemic

Experts and practitioners anticipate that students will return to school with significant unmet learning needs.²⁴ While educators at the district, school, and classroom levels can develop their own assessments to diagnose and address these gaps, it is important that districts collect systemwide data and adjust teaching and learning plans in response to that data. The state should point districts towards a narrow set of high-quality, Common Core-aligned assessment tools and screeners, and provide support on how to aggregate, analyze, and act on the data. Concurrently, the state should continue its efforts to design a student growth measure²⁵ and look at options for measuring student learning using multiple nonconsecutive years of data in order to better understand and address learning loss.

4. Provide Support and Resources to Districts to Ensure High-Quality, Rigorous, and Relevant Teaching and Learning

Rather than expecting educators to rapidly create and implement new instructional materials, state agencies and other partners should provide technical assistance to help districts select and implement high-quality materials;²⁶ better leverage existing materials for remote or hybrid instruction; and provide professional development to educators on relevant, rigorous, and equitable instruction.²⁷ Given the challenges of distance learning, especially for some students, districts and schools should first focus on prioritizing materials and instruction for English learners, students with disabilities, youth in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, and students in lower grades.

5. Support Districts in Measuring and Reporting Data on Well-Being for All Students and for Each Group of Students

This is an important time for district and state leaders to ramp up efforts to measure and address disparities in student engagement, school climate, family involvement, and student social and emotional well-being.²⁸ The state should require districts to continue measuring the Local Control Funding Formula “local indicators”²⁹ and discuss the results during local school board meetings. The state should also help districts identify and use engagement and climate instruments that may be particularly relevant during this time.³⁰

6. Create a Statewide Plan to Ensure All Students Have Access to Mental Health Screening and Supports

The plan should include increased training for staff to help them use restorative and trauma-informed practices, recognize student mental health needs, and connect families with appropriate services—all while protecting student privacy. It should include support and incentives to encourage districts and behavioral health departments to work together to provide on-campus and school-linked mental health services and prevention as well as early intervention programs. It should also include strategies for increasing Medi-Cal billing and reimbursement for mental health and healthcare services provided to students, including telehealth.

Flexibility Consistent with Equity Imperatives

During a crisis, local school district leaders need flexibility over how they manage their budgets and make decisions regarding staffing, instruction materials, instruction time, and class sizes.³¹ At the same time, flexibility can only be given in the context of strong assurances that all schools, particularly those serving low-income students and students of color, are held to a high standard in regards to both safety and learning. Historically, flexibility and local control have been used as tools to increase racial segregation and disparities.³² Now, as longstanding racial

and economic disparities have become even more obvious, state leaders should intentionally craft policies in ways that will close gaps and improve learning and well-being for students with the greatest needs. Flexibility can be part of the suite of options, but it must be accompanied by assurances that services for the most vulnerable students will be prioritized, protected, and improved as a result. For example, the state should offer flexibility combined with assurances in the following areas:

- **Allow districts to carry over unspent funds from one year to the next, so long as they are used for similar purposes.** For example, Local Control Funding Formula Supplemental and Concentration carry overs must come with assurances that those funds will be spent on the same student populations and purposes for which they were intended.
- **Offer districts flexibility over the types of facilities in which they may operate,** so that school can take place in libraries, parks, and other community spaces in order to allow for social distancing and enable deeper community partnership and broader student participation.
- **Remove class size caps and penalties to allow for local creativity around how to staff and organize classrooms.** If districts choose to increase class sizes in order to better organize schedules and staffing to support distance learning or social distancing, require that they report what they are doing to ensure that low-income students, English learners, youth in foster care, and students with disabilities receive sufficient and additional individualized and small-group supports aligned with their learning needs.
- **Offer districts reasonable flexibility to adjust staffing based on local needs.** While the legislature’s prohibition on layoffs has helped ensure stability for educators, staff, and students, it has also highly constrained local districts. Going forward, the state should more carefully balance state priorities with local staffing flexibility. Policymakers should refrain from imposing across-the-board prohibitions on layoffs, instead providing targeted protections for bilingual teachers, teachers in high-poverty schools, teachers in hard-to-staff subject areas, and teachers and staff of color. These educators will be essential to our recovery, and we must also strengthen the pipeline for these teachers.
- **Offer afterschool providers operational flexibilities,** along with adequate funding, to allow them to adjust their programming. CDE officials should take advantage of the authority the legislature has given them to modify or waive requirements for afterschool programs. This increased flexibility related to program hours, attendance, and staffing will allow afterschool providers to respond nimbly to modified school schedules and expand the capacity of school districts to provide extended learning time, high-quality student-to-adult relationships, meaningful enrichment opportunities, and social-emotional supports.

Securing More Funding

One of the most important roles of the state is to provide adequate and equitable funding for its schools. The pandemic has not only increased student needs but also led to an economic recession and steep reductions in the state budget. Although state leaders shielded school districts from painful budget cuts for 2020–21 by promising but deferring funding, this debt will eventually have to be paid.³³ To help districts navigate the pandemic, deepen and improve critical services, and avoid cuts in the coming years, state leaders must **advocate for and secure significantly more funding**. State leaders should communicate their plans to:

- **Secure additional local and state funding for education**, including through reprioritization of the state budget, reduction of tax expenditures, and additional taxes including on high-wealth corporations and individuals.
- **Seek additional and significant federal coronavirus relief and stimulus aid** in order to address learning loss, respond to social and emotional needs, provide for distance learning, comply with public health orders, and invest in education to help restart the economy and pave the way towards future social and economic prosperity.
- **Draw down additional federal funds to support physical and mental healthcare services** and reform the Medicaid-funded children’s mental health services system. This should include plans to increase the rate at which Medi-Cal-eligible students receive access to mental health services, plans to increase district Medi-Cal reimbursements, and improvements to school-based Medi-Cal administration.
- **Secure funds to address connectivity challenges so that all families have adequate access to the internet**. This is both a statewide and nationwide issue that can be addressed by expanding E-Rate, partnering with telecommunications companies and corporations, and through other programs.

Conclusion

Our educators and local education leaders have demonstrated extraordinary leadership and resilience during an unprecedented time of challenge. But as the recent actions for racial justice have demonstrated, our education system is grappling with more than just a health crisis. Black and Latinx students comprise the majority of our state’s student population. By any measure, their educational needs were underserved prior to the pandemic. Our education system’s response to COVID-19 must not reinforce and deepen the structural inequities and racism that contributed to these disparities. To address the current crisis and also continue California’s efforts to close opportunity and achievement gaps, strong state-level leadership is needed. By setting high expectations for learning, along with ample and equitable supports, our state leaders can ensure that meaningful learning continues through this pandemic and that students of color, English learners, low-income students, special education students, and all other vulnerable groups have equitable opportunities to succeed.

Authors

Heather Hough is the executive director of Policy Analysis for California Education.

Jennifer O'Day is an institute fellow at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and chair of the California Collaborative on District Reform.

Carrie Hahnel is an independent consultant and a fellow with the Opportunity Institute.

Arun Ramanathan is the chief executive officer of Pivot Learning.

Christopher Edley, Jr. is a president emeritus of the Opportunity Institute and a Berkeley Law School professor.

Maria Echaveste is the president of the Opportunity Institute.

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Appendix: School Reopening Guidance and Recommendations

- American Enterprise Institute, **[A Blueprint for Back to School](#)** (May, 2020)
- American Federation of Teachers, **[A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities](#)** (April, 2020)
- The Aspen Institute, **[State Actions to Support Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: Fostering Connectedness in the Pandemic Era](#)** (May, 2020)
- Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) **[School Reopening Planning Group Final Report](#)** (May, 2020)
- California County Superintendents Education Services Association **[School Reopening Guidance](#)** (June, 2020)
- California Department of Education, **[Stronger Together: A Guidebook for the Safe Reopening of California’s Public Schools](#)** (June, 2020)
- California Department of Public Health, **[Industry Guidance for Schools and School-Based Programs](#)** (June, 2020)
- California School Board Association (CSBA), **[The Uncertain Road Ahead](#)** (June, 2020)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention, **[Considerations for Schools](#)** (May, 2020)
- Chiefs for Change, **[The Return: How Should Education Leaders Prepare for Reentry and Beyond?](#)** (May, 2020)
- Chief State School Officers, **[Supporting States Amid Coronavirus Outbreak](#)** (April–June, 2020) and **[Restart & Recovery: Considerations for Teaching & Learning](#)** (July, 2020)
- FourPoint Education Partners, **[Planning for Re-entry and Recovery: A Guide for Promoting Equity, Improvement and Innovation](#)** (May, 2020)
- Opportunity Labs, **[Return to School Roadmap](#)** (May, 2020)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

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Related Publications

Borman, G. D. ***What Can Be Done to Address Learning Losses Due to School Closures?*** Policy Analysis for California Education. June 2020.

Cottingham, B., Gallagher, A., Gee, K., Myung, J., Gong, A., Kimner, H., Witte, J., & Hough, H. ***Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context: A Summary Brief.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. July 2020.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, CERAS 401
Stanford, CA 94305-3001
Phone: (650) 724-2832
Fax: (650) 723-9931

edpolicyinca.org