

# THE COVID CONSTITUENCY

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Emerging Priorities for  
Education Leaders

WRITTEN BY:  
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## SPECIAL THANKS

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# Prologue

Spring 2025. It is commencement season at a high school and the pandemic threat is finally gone. Educators, school board members, and other elected officials swirl amidst the happy parents of graduating students. After the ceremony, a TV camera suddenly appears, and a microphone is thrust into a district leader's face.

"A quick question," says the interviewer.

"In 2020, COVID-19 shut down our schools. Everyone suffered in some way. Then, the state and district received massive amounts of funding to be spent over almost four years."

"After all this uprooting, common sacrifice, and record resources, how have you made this education system better than what it was?"

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# Foreword



In March 2020, when COVID-19 shut down early learning programs, K-12 schools, and college campuses for **over 98 million** U.S. children, youth and college students, our nation began a unique shared experience. Many millions more parents with homebound students were made acutely aware of the importance of child care, schools, teachers, and access to technology.

While this rare convergence of Americans—the COVID Constituency—desires a return to the “normal” of in-person schooling, they understand that COVID-19’s impact requires major improvements to the education system. **Seventy-six percent** of parents polled say education is in crisis. **Seventy-one percent** of U.S. adults are concerned about K-12 student academic progress, a trend across parties and income levels. **Sixty-six percent** of parents would rethink how we educate students. Faced with their children’s individual academic and social-emotional struggles, the emerging COVID Constituency desires personalized learning and whole child approaches.

As schools moved toward reopening this fall, stressed state and local education leaders understandably strove to restore some of the “norm” that existed prior to the pandemic. Yet in moving from a triage to a transition phase, education leaders know that the pandemic completely exposed equity gaps, student wellness concerns, and learning disparities. The process that leads from triage to transition must meet immediate needs while also incorporating actions for long term transformation.

At the same time there is large public support for major education change, the U.S. Congress approved record funding to support restoring the education system—from sanitizing schools to making up lost learning. Three COVID-19 federal relief measures totaling almost \$300 billion for education, and another \$350 billion for state and local governments that can also support education initiatives, provide the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for far-reaching improvements in most educational systems.

While the federal relief funds must be committed and spent by 2024, state and local leaders have extensive flexibility for short- and long-term planning.

Almost two years of shared sacrifice has created an unexpected public movement that supports significant action. The COVID Constituency is asking for education transformation at a time when large federal relief investments have been made available. For elected policymakers and education leaders, this is an unprecedented moment when they have ample resources, strong public support, and necessary flexibility to take the bold actions that provide students with the education systems they need and deserve. **The time to act is now.**

Gov. Bob Wise

Dr. Javaid Siddiqi

# Executive Summary



Americans care deeply about education issues. Their shared experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened their sensitivity to the shortcomings of the education system and have fostered a vision for change. The COVID Constituency, comprising a growing movement of parents, teachers, students, education leaders, and organizations, desires systemic changes in education, rather than a reversion back to our pre-pandemic system. As state and district policymakers consider how they want to use their federal dollars for education transformation, it is imperative that they tap into the experiences and priorities of the communities that have the most at stake.

An in-depth analysis of national polls since the start of the pandemic reveals the top concerns for education stakeholders: learning loss, low quality curricula, and lack of support for underserved students. Additional concerns in the early childhood and higher education sectors indicate that the COVID Constituency spans the education continuum. Looking forward, the public wants to see the following actions prioritized in education:

- **Personalizing the learning experience.** 78 percent of adults agree that students learn better through personalized instruction.
- **Integrating whole child support systems.** Eight in ten parents support structured social, emotional, and mental health support for their child.
- **Addressing the digital divide and leveraging technology.** More than eight in ten parents believe that expanding computers and high-speed internet access for students should be a priority for schools when using federal funding, while more than eight in ten teachers believe that providing all students with free universal high-speed internet access is a critically important federal investment.

- **Expanding early learning and child care opportunities.** Three in four voters—including 63 percent of Republicans and 86 percent of Democrats—stated that elected leaders should make child care and early learning a priority in 2021.
- **Ensuring postgraduate success in higher education.** 47 percent of college students expressed interest in career planning services, while 42 percent wanted student life services, such as mental health support.
- **Investing in job skills and workforce training.** More than nine in ten Americans believe investing in opportunities that pair education and job-skills training with paid work would be an effective approach in helping people gain qualifications for good jobs.

Effectively moving from education triage and transition to transformation requires a thoughtful and intentional planning process. The following suggestions offer practical steps that policymakers and education leaders can take as they work towards reshaping education over the next three years:

1. Redefine desired learning objectives, then plan how to achieve them.
2. Determine what lessons have been learned from the COVID-19 shutdown and what is valuable to retain or expand.
3. Constantly emphasize that the goal is not to add more layers of activity to already stressed teachers and learners.
4. Utilize the COVID Constituency to build support for moving beyond restoration to a vastly improved education system for their children.
5. Respect time needed for emotional and physical recovery.

With the approval of the three federal COVID-19 relief packages—the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), and the American Rescue Plan (ARP)—most school districts have an unprecedented infusion of dollars through 2024 that can complement education needs, such as providing job training or wraparound services. District and education leaders should not be daunted by the administrative guidelines, regulations, and prescribed time limits for obligating these funds, as states and districts have extensive flexibility in redesigning and improving a school system. We recommend that education leaders use this flexibility to its advantage in the following ways:

- **States should allow latitude in the approval and review process to maximize the use of federal relief funds at the local level.** States must give districts and their schools space and time to adjust, receive feedback, plan strategically, and take bold action.
- **Local districts should use this flexibility to revise their plans and take the time needed to build the desired system.** Since a district does not have to lock in its long-term plan immediately after the state receives approval of its plan, local leaders should use this time to develop constituent-informed decisions.
- **States and localities must think about what funding can be reserved for long-term change efforts,** especially as reserving federal dollars will offer the greatest opportunity to institute major systems change for the foreseeable future.

The opportunity is here to reshape education in America for the good of all students.

# 1. Introduction

## WHO IS THE COVID CONSTITUENCY?

From 2020 to 2021, the United States has been gripped in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a cataclysmic disruption of its education system. Unparalleled in how it has affected the entire population, the pandemic is an opportunity to spur significant changes to 21st century education.

The P-20 (pre-kindergarten, K-12 and postsecondary) public education system has a long history in the United States and continues to play a complex role in our society. It is often prone to scrutiny, yet slow to change. There are times, however, when major events have driven significant developments. Millions of returning WWII veterans pushed the enactment of the GI Bill, resulting in a massive expansion of education opportunities and institutions. The Soviet Union launching Sputnik in 1957, sparked massive investments in science and math. Simultaneously, the civil rights movement began the long process of school integration.

The publication of [A Nation at Risk](#) in 1983 starkly highlighted the concerns of national education, business, and political leaders, stating that the world was "...matching and surpassing our educational attainments." It also noted that in 1982, President Reagan called for public awareness and action "...to create a resurgence of that thirst for education that typifies our Nation's history." This national call to action prompted decades of policy change in education that **resulted in** publicly available information on students and schools, along with many other reforms.

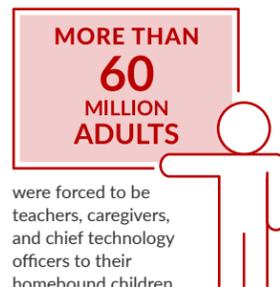
Issues such as economic imperatives, national security concerns, and social unrest generated unavoidable motivations for traditionally slow-changing education systems to respond to crises. Yet even during these times, there was not always a united public to support bold policymakers. In many instances, new education policies were developed ahead of a clear public consensus, which, in turn, engendered decades of debate over implementation.

Now comes 2021, and with COVID-19 still unresolved, the U.S. once again finds itself struggling with an unprecedented disruption of its educational systems. Unlike other ground-shaking moments in education, the initial response will come not from national or state leaders but instead from parents and families across the country who have shared the same searing experiences. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a mass movement is converging that supports the transformation of education in this country. Unlike previous momentous events, state and local policymakers and educators find that broad public interest has been joined by a period of once-in-a-lifetime resources from the federal government, imparting an opportunity to make dramatic and necessary changes to the education system.

**A mass movement is converging that supports the transformation of education in this country.**



were pulled from the classroom in March 2020



were forced to be teachers, caregivers, and chief technology officers to their homebound children



were forced into new teaching environments



were dedicated directly to education, and another **\$350 billion** were directed to state and local governments, who can decide to use the discretionary dollars to support education efforts

In March 2020, the sense of normalcy we all had come to know abruptly halted as the United States implemented lockdowns across the country to mitigate the effects of the global coronavirus pandemic. These closures had a direct impact on families, educators, and students, from prekindergarten to grade 20.

- **50 million K-12 and 20 million higher education students were pulled from their classrooms within several weeks**
- **More than 60 million adults were forced to be teachers, caregivers, and chief technology officers to their homebound children**
- **3.2 million teachers, 1.7 million postsecondary faculty and instructors, and millions more non-academic staff were similarly forced into new teaching environments**

The pandemic closed school and business doors, and, as a result, citizens across the country found themselves in a shared experience unlike any other; one that impacted their view on how essential education is in this country. Certainly, many families' experiences differed greatly based on economic situation, race, geography,

and technology availability. The two-income middle class family was able to access basic support more readily than the single parent laid off from a minimum wage service job. However, regardless of their situations, most families became far more aware of the importance of teachers, child care, counseling, and connectivity.

While the pandemic may have illuminated the importance of the U.S. education system, it also exposed vast inequities and the need for systemic change. This was further reinforced by the heightened social unrest over racial injustice. Even though states, schools, educators, and communities worked hard to provide an education amid a pandemic, the fact is that millions of students lost significant amounts of learning time and related services for months on end. Parents witnessed firsthand the struggles their children experienced and now fear that significant declines in their academic and social-emotional development will have long-term consequences.

If this country wants to move toward strong pandemic recovery, the slow trickle of education change we have experienced must become a national torrent. Efforts at recovery that ignore the inequities and shortcomings in the education system will jeopardize short- and long-term outcomes—not just of students and families but of communities and the economy.

However, past examples point to reasons for hope. In the last century, the United States recovered from an economic depression and two world wars. Each recovery brought with it dramatic changes to our economy, society, and educational systems. There is no reason to think this crisis will be any different, as massive disruption causes major shifts in attitudes and actions. The COVID-19 pandemic is unparalleled in its national and worldwide application. Join it with the resulting employment downturn and resurgence of social unrest, and this becomes a pivotal moment for education.

At the same time, every state and school district now has access to an unparalleled amount of federal relief dollars. In addition to the federal government dedicating \$300 billion dollars directly to education, it also directed another \$350 billion to state and local governments to be used as discretionary funding that can support education efforts. Additionally, Congress approved a temporary boost in funds that can support child care and development.

Some states even found themselves with unexpected surpluses of state funds. For example, California, projecting a massive deficit only a year ago, now appropriated a FY2022 \$75.7 billion dollar surplus despite pandemic closures. These massive infusions of federal, state, and local dollars present a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build the school systems that people desire.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the single greatest shared experience since WWII. The general public emerged with a much greater awareness of education and what it needs to make a difference for all learners. Their motivation is born from adversity and endurance. These issues make clear that it is time for education leaders and policymakers to listen to the newly-formed coalition and make dramatic and necessary changes to the education system. Mounting evidence and data show that the COVID Constituency, a growing public movement across the country, understands and supports education change and transformation.

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## 2. Returning to “Normal” is Not an Option

### THE INADEQUACIES AND WIDENING CHASMS OF THE PRE-PANDEMIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

In less than a month, the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the normal routine of education systems across the country and the world, requiring schools to close to keep children and staff safe. As a result of these lockdowns, schools across the United States could not provide basic services such as food distribution, social engagement, counseling, extracurricular activities, and more.

Suddenly, even the baseline education system was shut down.

Yet even during “normal” times, the U.S. education system that existed pre-COVID-19 had many shortcomings, notably the chronic gaps in access and opportunities many students experienced. The coronavirus pandemic accelerated longstanding negative trends and widened disparities among students, creating chasms within the education system.

#### Shortcomings of the Education System Prior to the Pandemic

Far too many young children, youth, and adults in the U.S. experience an education system that frustrates individual learners trying to achieve their goals. This kind of system denies the nation an engaged, high-achieving citizenry and workforce. Education's inadequacies do not lack examination, however. A plethora of

It forced a persistent spotlight on issues in the education system that have long existed but had yet to be adequately addressed at the national, state, or local levels. As the push to reopen schools continues, it is crucial to recognize that returning to “normal” is not an option.

books, news articles, and opinion pieces share stories or views about the failings of education beginning in early childhood and continuing into the workforce. Many of these shortcomings have existed for years and are deeply engrained in the policies and practices that drive the education system in this country.

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On average, an early educator earns **\$12.12 per hour**, one of the lowest paying jobs in the U.S

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OF EARLY  
EDUCATORS



need public assistance



**\$10,759**

median cost for infant care at a child care center with a range across the country from **\$5,307-\$23,666**. For someone earning the proposed minimum wage of \$15.00/hour, out-of-pocket child care could consume **20-33% of pre-tax income** for one child



**\$8,672**

median cost for 4-year-olds at a child care center with a range across the country from **\$4,670-\$18,657**



In many states, there is only enough child care for **1 in 5 children**

## Early Childhood

Quality child care is critical for young children's progress and success over time and provides families the ability to join the workforce. Despite its importance, many families lack access to the resources and programming needed to support the development of young children. Even though child care is critical for a strong economy and workforce, it can be **hard to find** and **costly**, leaving out significant numbers of young children and families across the country. Caregivers are also among those lowest paid in the U.S., even though a college degree is often required. Child care disparities **vary from state to state**, but national trends of inequitable cost and availability, as well as low wages for caregivers, have long been a struggle for the early childhood sector and families.

- On average, an early educator **earns \$12.12 per hour**, making it one of the lowest paid jobs in the U.S.
- Around 50 percent of early educators need public assistance.
- Annual **median cost** for infant care at a child care center is **\$10,759** with a range across the country from **\$5,307 to \$23,666**. For someone earning the federal minimum wage of **\$7.25/hour** working full-time, out-of-pocket child care costs could consume 35-157% of pre-tax income for one child.
- Median cost for 4-year-olds at a child care center is **\$8,672** with a range across the country from **\$4,670 to \$18,657**.
- In **many states**, there is only enough child care available for 1 in 5 children.

## K-12 Education

The K-12 system provides access to free, compulsory public education that prepares students for the future, building on the foundation that begins in early childhood. The system gives students and families access to both academic and non-academic learning opportunities, yet many students experience a vastly different education than others do. A school's location, as well as the students' home and economic situations, greatly influence key factors such as school funding, teacher experience and credentials, school infrastructure, availability of counseling services, and much more. Students from various demographic categories often endure an education system that struggles to provide equitable access, resources, opportunities, and outcomes. Furthermore, at almost every income level, U.S. students perform poorly on international benchmarks, a concern for global competitiveness in the job market.

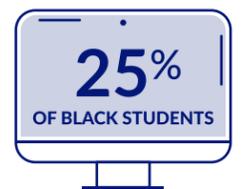
- **The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)**, often designated "the nation's scorecard," shows relatively little advancement in reading and math proficiency for most states.
- In 2018, the U.S. placed 13th in reading and ranked 30th in math on the **Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)**.
- In 2018, **Pew Research Center** found that the digital "homework gap" impacted U.S. teens, with 25 percent of Black students lacking internet access to do homework;

there were similar findings for students from lower-income households. This disparity worsened significantly during COVID-19- related school shutdowns and universal reliance on virtual learning.

- In 2018-19, U.S. public graduation rates for **students with disabilities** was at 68 percent compared to the U.S. overall high school graduation rate of 86 percent.
- In **2017-18**, within the approximately 3 million students who participated in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, only 18 percent were Hispanic, 13 percent were Black, and 10 percent were American Indian.
- In **2015-16**, students in high poverty schools had less access to advanced science and mathematics coursework that prepared students for college.
- In 2017, **seven states** provided **less total school funding** per student than they had in 2008, showing that school funding had not yet recovered from pre-Great Recession levels prior to the pandemic.



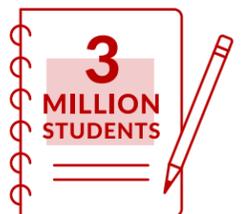
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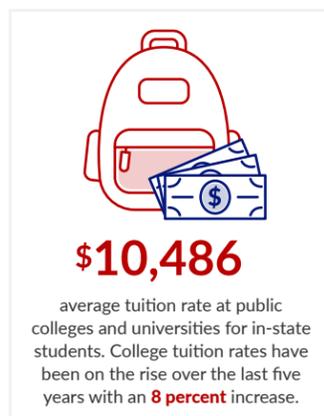
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The U.S. public graduation rates for students with disabilities in 2018-2019



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## Higher Education

For many students and adults in the U.S., education does not end when they leave K-12 schools. Many jobs and careers require a postsecondary education as a prerequisite for employment. Students with four- and two-year college degrees acknowledge the long-term benefits of their postsecondary education: they **earn more** on average than those with a high school diploma, have lower unemployment rates, and are **more satisfied** with their jobs. In a time when almost every job requires additional education and lifetime learning, it is essential that both young and older adults have access to a higher education system that helps them meet the ongoing career demands in a globally competitive environment. Postsecondary access has greater importance today because COVID-19 eliminated many jobs and consolidated their functions. As a result, returning employees must have higher skill levels. Yet many people struggle to access, afford, or complete their postsecondary education, even at a time where there are more postsecondary institutions and options than ever before.

- College tuition rates have been **on the rise with the average state school tuition increasing 8 percent compared to five years ago and the average rate at public colleges and universities reaching \$10,486 per year for in-state students.**
- Student loan debt has continued to increase over time. In 2021, it is **estimated that student debt has reached \$1.6 trillion dollars, with the average amount of student loan debt for bachelor's degrees sitting at \$28,950, and with Black students borrowing the most.**
- In fall 2020, only 74 percent of students in their first year of college **persisted** into year two, with Black and Hispanic students below the overall average.
- In December 2018, there were around 36 million Americans who **began some postsecondary education but have not completed their degrees and are no longer enrolled.**

## Workforce & Careers

The U.S. economy relies on a skilled workforce that is prepared and ready for employment and meets areas of demand. A skilled workforce depends on an education system to help workers gain the knowledge, skills, and experience that will make them job-ready in an ever-changing environment. This delicate balance, when even tipped slightly, leaves employers, the workforce, and the economy out of alignment, impacting the ability of the economy and workforce to meet its fullest potential. Rapidly increasing technological advances, now joined with the complications wrought by COVID-19, has impacted the labor market, causing many to lose jobs that they are unlikely to get back without reskilling or upskilling.

- In 2019, 7 out of 10 companies **reported shortages of talent.**
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) administered the

These chronic challenges existed in the U.S. prior to COVID-19, but now the pandemic has exacerbated these ongoing issues throughout the education continuum.

Now is the time to make moves to rewrite these damaging statistics. Regardless of age, for each and every student to find success, schools must reopen with an eye to a future in which individual learning needs are met, in an environment that benefits all students' development. Whether in teaching,

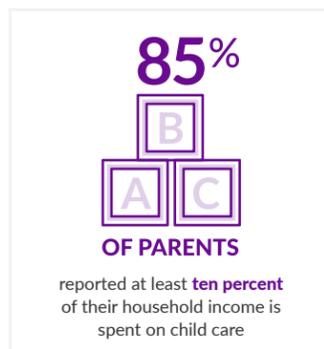
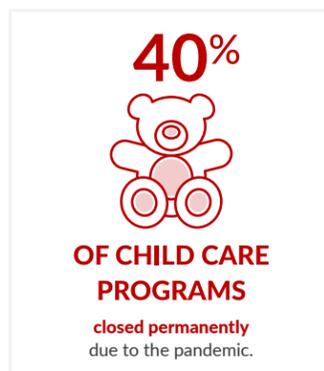
Programme for the **International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)**, and results show that the U.S. scored below the PIAAC International Average in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

- In 2017, 13 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds **surveyed** had hours reduced or lost a job due to automation, and the public anticipates (8 in 10 adults) that widespread automation in jobs will be coming in the next few decades.
- **Wage growth** was slow as of 2019, and gaps in wages linger for women, low- and middle-class, Black, and Hispanic workers.

technology application, social-emotional development, learning recovery, or social service delivery, we must engage students, families, teachers, communities, and businesses in innovative policymaking.

This newly developing COVID Constituency cares deeply about the success of the public education system. It is time to leverage this unique moment of public resolve with major resources.





## The Coronavirus Pandemic Widens Chasms in the Education System

The pandemic's impact is still rippling across the country, but it is already clear that COVID-19 intensified existing issues in the education system, a system ill-equipped to meet student and workforce needs. The education process and student outcomes worsened in most education systems, despite schools, staff, and communities around the country going above and beyond to support students across the P-20 system.

### Early Childhood

A year and a half into the pandemic, families of young children still find themselves without adequate or affordable child care. Nationally, it is estimated that 40 percent of child care programs closed permanently due to their inability to sustain the pandemic's impact. In addition to fewer child care options, families are now facing increased costs. In 2021, 85 percent of families surveyed reported spending at least 10 percent of their household income on child care, an increase from 73 percent in 2020. Through the **Child Tax Credit**, the federal government has provided funding to alleviate the burden. However, this is a temporary, one-year measure that will likely not address the underlying issue of child care costs. Moreover, for child care to fully reopen, workers need to return, yet **only half** of the 35 percent of those child care workers laid off early in the pandemic have returned, likely due to other available options that pay higher wages. A struggling early childhood system has clearly worsened during the pandemic.

### K-12

K-12 education faces similar crises. With COVID-19 eliminating most in-person K-12 schooling, students across the country missed out on academic and non-academic opportunities for lengthy periods of time. Connecticut, a state that has been closely tracking attendance during the pandemic, reported that statewide, chronic absence **increased** from 12.2 percent to over 20 percent during the current school year and was more prevalent among remote students, students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, Black and Hispanic students, English learners, students with disabilities, and males. Another **report** found higher absences among the youngest children, with one school noting a 60 percent increase in kindergarten to sixth grade absenteeism. Enrollment in public schools is **declining** at rates not seen **since World War II**. It is particularly concerning that an estimated **3 million** of the country's most vulnerable students have not received virtual or in-person instruction since March 2020 and are currently unaccounted for.

The disruption to learning has also resulted in a decline in test scores. Indiana, a state that decided to test all students during the 2020-21 school year, posted **iLEARN data** showing that students in grades 3-8 who scored proficient in English and math had declined almost 10 percent from 2018-19. Black students in Indiana fared worse in this year's assessments, with only 8 percent passing both the English and math sections, highlighting the uneven impact of the pandemic. Kindergarten reading assessments are concerning as well, with one **report** showing that around 20 percent fewer kindergarteners were on track to learn how to read compared to those in the previous year. This illustrates just a few examples of what states are starting to see in assessment results from the 2020-21 school year.

Student academic performance is not the only outcome impacted by this pandemic. Mental health concerns are on the rise. From April to May 2020, **ER visits** for mental health-related issues for children aged 12 to 17 years increased 31 percent from the same period in 2019. Students in grades 10-12 who attended remote schooling experienced **significantly lower** levels of well-being socially, emotionally, and/or academically.

### Postsecondary Education

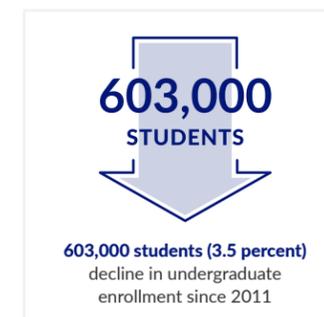
Postsecondary institutions and students also face a critical juncture as a result of the pandemic. National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) **reported** the steepest decline of 603,000 students (3.5 percent) in undergraduate enrollment since it began publishing data in 2011. All types of postsecondary institution sectors saw undergraduate enrollment declines. The community college sector was hardest hit, declining by 476,000 students (9.5 percent). Enrollment declines were true for traditional age students, older students, males, and females. Only seven states found increases in undergraduate enrollment since last spring. Low-income college students faced particular barriers—including access to housing and food—as campuses closed. Their declines in enrollment are particularly evident in community colleges but are found across all institution sectors.

Persistence and retention rates have also declined during the pandemic. NSC **reported** that first-year persistence rate dropped 2 percentage points for students who entered college for the

first time in fall 2019. Latinx students had the highest decline at 3.2 percentage points. For the first time in almost five years, persistence, an early indicator of college success, saw a decline. Retention rates declined mainly in the community college sector, down 2.1 percentage points, to 51.6 percent.

With declines in enrollment, persistence, and retention, institutions and students face an unexpected future as college plans hang in the balance. It is typical to see undergraduate enrollment **grow** during a recession, so these new pandemic trends are cause for concern. In addition, with significant losses in revenue, postsecondary institutions face an **uncertain financial outlook**.

Our shortcomings in the U.S. education system are systemic in nature and the pandemic has illuminated these issues. It will take intentional and strategic action to adapt and develop the high-performing education systems that our youngest to oldest students deserve, and the kind of workforce the future economy needs. The U.S. education system has the potential and, more importantly, the imperative to be great for all students. The nation's economic and social success mandates meeting the moment where public will and desire align with opportunity of resources to make lasting change and transformation that moves far beyond the pre-COVID-19 "normal." For these reasons, the COVID Constituency seeks a future where bold efforts will bring about great advances for our children, economy, and country.



**The nation's economic and social success mandates meeting the moment where public will and desire align with opportunity of resources to make lasting change and transformation that moves far beyond the pre-COVID-19 "normal."**

### 3. A COVID Constituency Eager for Change Has Formed

#### CONCERNS AND PRIORITIES OF THE NEW MOVEMENT

COVID-19 has become a powerful equalizer, as all families now face the shortcomings in our education system and the resulting academic, social, and emotional impacts on their children. This unexpected experience is powering a public desire to address student needs and foster a more hopeful future for our children and youth.



An in-depth analysis of national public opinion polls and surveys since early in the pandemic reveals the current and growing perceptions, concerns, and priorities of constituents, including students, parents, and educators. These recent national polls and surveys have indicated a bipartisan interest in structurally transforming America's education system through a COVID Constituency, which desires new and dramatic

changes in the way funding is allocated, how children are taught, and what resources are available to support students. As policymakers and education leaders work to undo the damage that the pandemic has caused, it is imperative that the U.S. builds the system that it truly desires, rooted in the voices and needs of stakeholders on the ground.



## A Desire for Education Change

Americans care deeply about education issues, and their shared experiences during the COVID-19 shutdowns have heightened their sensitivity to the shortcomings of the education system. A poll conducted by FIL Inc. in November 2020 during a COVID-19 spike found that **three in four parents** (76 percent) believed today's education system is a major problem or in crisis. Since then, confidence in public schools has continued to fall. According to Gallup, only **one in three Americans** (32 percent) had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the public school system in 2021, a nine-point drop from 2020. Furthermore, negative perceptions about the current state of public schools are consistent across party lines: only **35 and 37 percent** of Republicans and Democrats, respectively, were satisfied with the quality of public education in the U.S.

Aligning with these concerns, overall political will for bold education initiatives presents a compelling case for policymakers to address public education issues. A survey conducted by [Education Champions](#) found that nearly seven

in ten (69 percent) voters were more likely to vote for a Senate candidate who prioritizes education and has a clear education agenda. Additionally, 71 percent of Americans believed it is important for Congress and the president to make education a top national priority, and 15 percent state they would get involved with an organization working to elevate education. Coming out of the pandemic, the momentum surrounding this support should be leveraged to advocate for tangible change in America's education system.

Through an analysis of national polls and surveys since the start of the pandemic, the top concerns for K–12 education stakeholders include learning loss, low quality curricula, and lack of supports for underserved students. Additional concerns in the early childhood and higher education spaces indicate that the COVID Constituency spans the education continuum.

The following sections dive deeper into the top concerns and priorities highlighted in national polls and surveys.

## Learning loss concerns

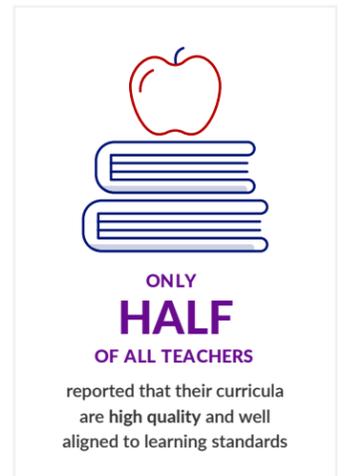
Summer learning loss, also called summer slide, was already a concern among parents and policymakers prior to the pandemic. This issue was **magnified during the pandemic**, as schools were not prepared to respond quickly to school closures and shift to virtual teaching for every student. Many students had to adapt to weak internet service, limited access to technological devices, and a poor home learning environment. Whether described as learning loss, lost instructional time, missed learning, or need for learning recovery, the pandemic has resulted in many students falling further behind in both academic progress and social-emotional development. As schools resume in-person learning, teachers will also be confronted with greater learning differences between students in their classrooms.

## Low quality content and curricula

There is no question that the quality of educational content and curricula is essential for effective student learning. Teaching materials and lessons must be well-aligned to state standards, and the level of academic rigor must be grade appropriate. Yet, educators do not believe that America's current school curricula are satisfactory. According to Educators for Excellence, only **half of all teachers** reported that their curricula are high

quality and well aligned to learning standards. Whether a result of the pandemic or from long breaks, student learning loss will likely continue to be a major concern for Americans across political parties. According to a spring 2021 survey conducted by the National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC), **65 percent** of voters believed learning loss during the pandemic is a "very big problem," including 61 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of Independents, and 71 percent of Republicans. Another poll by the University of Southern California [Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research](#) reported that concerns were even higher for underserved students: 81 percent of adults were concerned about lower-income children and 77 percent about children of color.

These numbers further declined for teachers at schools with a majority of low-income students (44 percent), students of color (41 percent), and English learners (33 percent). Additionally, only 37 percent of teachers reported receiving training that enables them to effectively teach the curricula, and only 35 percent believed their curricula includes high-quality assessments to measure student learning.



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### Personalized Learning

Recent polls demonstrate a large increase in public interest in education that meets individual children's needs. Nearly **three-quarters of voters** (74 percent) believed a lack of learning focused on individual needs is a problem in the U.S., and 72 percent believed it is an "extremely" or "very important" issue to address. COVID-19's impact on learning has driven public awareness about recognizing the individual needs and assets of each student to achieve maximum learning outcomes.

Personalized learning emphasizes a student's mastery of knowledge and skills rather than simply meeting the time requirements of an academic calendar. Rather than a

one-size-fits-all teaching approach to a classroom, **personalized learning** is based on the collaboration of teachers, students, and community members "to develop a unique learning plan for each student based on interests, learning styles, and real time data."

This may become even more significant as teachers return to instructing students who exhibit greater disparate learning outcomes than when schools closed. Defining personalized learning in the current COVID-19 context is important; equally important is extensive discussion between education leaders and the public about the strategies in pedagogy, data, assessment, and resource allocation that are necessary to create meaningful impact.

### Supporting historically underserved students

Historically, underserved students in the U.S. have not been given the necessary resources to encourage academic progress. An equitable school environment adopts engaging and culturally competent curricula, provides additional academic and social support for students in need, and fosters trusting relationships between students, parents, and educators. Unfortunately, America's teachers do not believe schools properly support their most vulnerable students. In 2016-17, **over 1.3 million students** were

homeless, yet only **30 percent of teachers** reported that their school often meets the needs of homeless students and foster youth. This trend persists with only 31 and 33 percent of teachers, respectively, believing that their school meets the needs of LGBTQ+ and non-native English speakers. There is a marginal increase for students with physical disabilities (40 percent), students with learning disabilities (42 percent), students from low-income households (45 percent), and students of color (52 percent).



### Early learning and child care

Early learning opportunities, often provided through preschool or child care, expose children to critical social and emotional skills at an early age, laying the groundwork for lifelong learning abilities and cognitive and social development. **Decades of research** shows that, compared to children without preschool experience, children who attend preschool are more prepared for kindergarten. **A recent study** also found that the benefits children receive from preschool programs can be retained if they transition into a high-quality elementary school. Likewise, high-quality child care exposes children to social and emotional development, especially when parents are working and unable to help their child develop these early life skills.

However, the limited access to and high cost of preschool and child care services, worsened by the pandemic, create barriers to these developmental benefits, especially for working families. Shuttered child care facilities, low pay for educators and caregivers, and high program costs contribute to a **shortage of options for parents**, even when accounting for state and federally funded programs. Amid closures, **six in ten parents** said that there was a serious problem finding quality, affordable child care in their community. Furthermore, **46 percent of Americans** believed that a lack of access to quality child care is one of the greatest barriers to getting people back to work during the pandemic. Some even call the child care crisis a national security issue.

### Higher education

The pandemic's eradication of in-person instruction and campus traditions has driven a sharp change in what the public values in higher education. A Gallup survey found that almost **half of all parents** (46 percent) preferred not to send their children to a four-year college after high school, regardless of financial or other obstacles. Instead of four-year college, 16 percent of parents were interested in non-college vocational training and 22 percent preferred that their child consider other options, such as starting their own business or a job, doing community service, or joining the military. Only 8 percent of parents preferred a two-year community college. These changing opinions are reflected in recent declining enrollment rates.

Students have also reconsidered the value of college after shifting to online classes. **Over half of college students** (56 percent) were concerned that their degree is less valuable because their coursework was online. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of students (65 percent) believed that higher education is not worth the cost, an eight-point increase from December 2020. In a **Gallup survey** exploring the barriers to college completion, cost of attendance, emotional stress, and child care responsibilities were the top reasons why respondents did not complete their degrees.

While many of these attitudes existed or were developing prior to COVID-19, this searing experience advanced the public's interest and intensity for action. The public is speaking out, and they demand an education system that fosters an optimal learning environment and sufficiently addresses student needs.

## Policy Priorities of the COVID Constituency

It is imperative that legislators and education leaders acknowledge and address constituent priorities when enacting policies. In considering how education systems should move forward, Americans have expressed strong support for increasing funding for public education,

investing in job skills and workforce training, providing greater student support systems, addressing the digital divide, expanding early learning and child care, and ensuring postgraduate success in higher education.

### Increasing funding for public education

Overall, there is broad public support for increasing funding for public education. According to NSBAC, **59 percent** of voters believed funding for public schools should increase. Of those, 86 percent supported additional education funding even if it results

in additional taxes. Voters also prefer supporting public education over alternatives: 61 percent of voters believed it is better to allocate funds to improving public education, compared to only 18 percent who supported vouchers for students to attend private or religiously affiliated schools.



## Integrating whole child support systems

Schools serve as hubs of supports for students, especially for those who do not have optimal support systems at home. Good schools nurture academic progress, provide social and emotional supports, and deliver proper nutrition to students. During school closures, students have had to navigate virtual learning environments without access to resources they typically receive during in-person learning. While many schools across the U.S. have developed innovative ways to provide meals to students learning virtually, efforts to provide other whole child supports have been lacking. The public has expressed a strong desire for greater academic and mental and physical health supports, all necessary elements of whole child development.

### Academic supports

**Sixty-six percent of parents** would rethink how we educate students and consider new ways to teach children. In another survey, **78 percent** of adults agreed that tailored instruction is a better way for students to learn. In contrast, only one in ten adults strongly believed that whole group instruction is a better learning method. Investing in personalized learning would require policy considerations such as effective data systems and pedagogical training for educators to improve success.

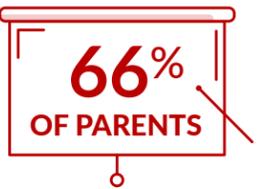
### Mental health

Social isolation, along with academic and personal struggles, have led to **greater feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress** among students. Meanwhile, schools grappling with virtual teaching have not been able to fully support students dealing with these issues. In fact, only **three in ten teachers and parents** gave their school high ratings for helping students with social-emotional challenges during the pandemic. This has led to more parents and educators expressing a desire for greater mental health services for students. **Eight in ten parents** supported structured social, emotional, and mental health support for their child, and nearly the same number of parents (**77 percent**) wanted school funding to go toward investing in counselors and school psychologists. As students experience an abundance of stressors in a changing school, community, and global environment, schools must adapt to student needs to help facilitate optimal learning.

**59%**  
OF VOTERS



believed funding for public schools should increase

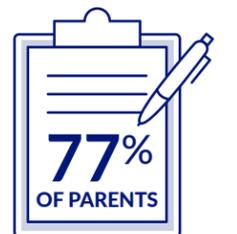


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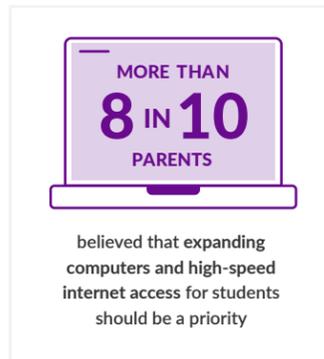


ONLY  
**3 IN 10**  
PARENTS & TEACHERS

gave their school high ratings for helping students with social-emotional challenges during the pandemic



wanted school funding to go toward investing in counselors and school psychologists



### Closing the digital divide and leveraging technology

The past year revealed wide disparities in access to internet and broadband, as well as access to digital devices, the lack of which has been detrimental to student learning. **Four in ten teachers** believed that limited access to reliable internet and a conducive learning environment were major obstacles for their students. Among teachers in schools with a majority of low-income students, students of color, or English learners, this number increased to nearly half of all teachers.

Though schools and communities worked to increase the availability of internet access and electronic devices for students technological access remains a top concern across political parties. **NSBAC** found that 89 percent of Democrats, 73 percent of Republicans, and 70 percent of Independents viewed easier access to technology and broadband as important. Unsurprisingly, given the barriers that parents and educators have faced, **more than eight in ten parents** believed that schools should prioritize expanding computer availability and high-speed internet access when using federal funding while more than **eight in ten teachers** (81 percent) believed that providing all students with free universal high-speed internet access is a critically important federal investment.

Despite these challenges, educators and parents have also learned over the past year and a half about new opportunities to leverage technology to improve communication and classroom teaching. A survey conducted by **Educators for**

**Excellence** found that through virtual teaching, 67 percent of full-time public school teachers learned ways to integrate technology into their lessons that they will use after the pandemic, and 54 percent reported that student access and familiarity with technology improved. Likewise, the University of Southern California's **Understanding America Study** found that parents want schools to use online platforms, such as Canvas or Google Classrooms, to store, organize, and distribute class materials (73 percent).

Using technology can also streamline communication between students or parents and educators. **Over half of teachers** (52 percent) reported that virtual meetings have made meetings with parents and administrators easier. Similarly, a **large majority of parents** also preferred to attend parent-teacher conferences remotely (80 percent) and wanted students to communicate with their teachers through digital methods, such as email (75 percent).

Additionally, parents desired flexibility with school structures and how their children are taught. More than seven in ten parents (73 percent) were interested in pivoting to remote schooling if there is poor weather or other another reason that warrants school closures. Half of parents (50 percent) supported allowing students to work on their own time, without a teacher present. A majority also wanted students to be able to submit assignments (63 percent) and read (59 percent) online.

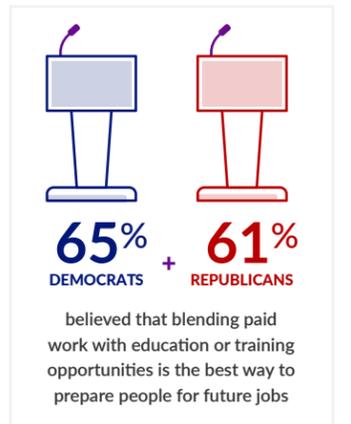
### Investing in job skills and workforce training

Establishing a strong connection between education and career is crucial for encouraging postsecondary enrollment, especially as the promise of career opportunities motivates students to prioritize education. Students want more information about how education can translate to career options, a knowledge gap that existed well before the pandemic. One strategy to make the college-to-career pathway more transparent is to invest in job skills and workforce training, particularly at lower-cost technical and community colleges.

Moreover, workforce development initiatives are an effective approach to recovering the labor market and stimulating the economy after a tumultuous period of layoffs and business closures. The public agrees: **One-third of Americans** (33 percent) believed a lack of education or job skills training is one of the greatest barriers to getting back to

work. Long after the pandemic, workforce development will continue to be important in preparing the students for future jobs in new and developing industries.

Public opinion surveys indicated overall support for investing in opportunities that pair education and job skills training with paid work, with more than **nine in ten Americans** believing this approach would be effective in helping people gain qualifications for good jobs. Additionally, most Americans (62 percent), including 65 percent of Democrats and 61 percent of Republicans, believed that blending paid work with education or training opportunities is the best method to prepare people for future jobs. Parents also supported **investments in job skills training**, with 82 percent favoring work-based learning programs or apprenticeships and 80 percent wanting more vocational classes.





### **Expanding early learning and child care**

Due to difficulties accessing quality child care, a challenge that stems from experiences of homebound families during the shutdown, policymakers must prioritize early childhood policy initiatives. In spite of party differences, **a majority of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents** believed that their member of Congress should work with President Joe Biden on child care and early learning issues. **Three in four voters** (74 percent)—including 63 percent of Republicans and 86 percent of Democrats—stated that elected leaders should make child care and early learning a priority in 2021. Voters pointed to a variety of early childhood education policies that seek to improve access to early learning opportunities, with 84 percent or more voters wanting additional financial support through the following options:

1. **Funding through an income-based sliding scale to help with the cost of quality child care;**
2. **A tax credit for child care, available to working parents or businesses to provide services to employees; or**
3. **Free preschool for all three- and four-year-old children.**

Constituents also care about early childhood educators. **Nearly nine in ten voters** (88 percent) supported higher pay and greater professional development opportunities for early childhood educators and caregivers. Ensuring higher salaries for early childhood teachers and caregivers can attract and retain high-quality professionals in the early learning space.

### **Ensuring postgraduate success in higher education**

Student priorities for higher education centers around career preparation and post-graduate outcomes. In a **survey of nearly 1,500 students**, when asked about what services their college should offer, nearly half (47 percent) expressed interest in career planning services, while 42 percent wanted student life services, such as

mental health support. Thirty percent of students were interested in academic support services. In contrast, only 21 percent of students believed their college should offer amenities and 17 percent of students wanted non-degree program offerings.



COVID-19 has forced a shared experience among Americans throughout the education continuum, eliciting clear opinions from the public about the most pressing issues. In the face of major education challenges, such as learning loss concerns, social and emotional struggles, resource gaps, and low enrollment rates, aligning

America's education policies with student needs and workforce demands is necessary to maximize pandemic recovery and education outcomes long after. Addressing these issues is especially critical for historically disadvantaged students who are disproportionately impacted by systemic inequities.

**63 percent of Americans still believe that America's best days in education are still ahead of us, indicating that the U.S. has the hope, optimism, and power to take action on long-overdue and necessary changes.**

### Implementing innovative policy change in national, state, and local education

Key to these efforts is developing actionable policy changes based on data-driven research and collaboration at all levels. While the influx of federal funding can help triage immediate education issues, federal, state, and local leaders must also develop strategic and innovative plans for long-term education transformation after federal relief funding runs out. Based on recent national polls and surveys outlined in this report, several policy priorities are a start to fundamentally improving the resources students are afforded and smoothing the education pathway for student success into adulthood:

- Advancing data-driven, whole child support systems, including personalized learning opportunities, additional academic supports, and mental health resources.
- Closing the digital divide by expanding broadband connectivity and access to computing devices for students, particularly low-income students and students in rural communities.
- Investing in cross-sector initiatives to ensure students properly transition through the education continuum, including expanding early learning opportunities, promoting college readiness in K-12, and revitalizing workforce training in schools.

- Developing actionable goals and improving monitoring and evaluation efforts to track progress and keep education leaders at all levels accountable for the goals they set.

Now is the time to leverage our experiences as a COVID Constituency to reimagine an education system that works for all students. This must involve extensive discussions between the public, community leaders, and educators. Fortunately, **63 percent of Americans** still believe that America's best days in education are still ahead of us, indicating that the U.S. has the hope, optimism, and power to take action on long-overdue and necessary changes.

The COVID Constituency has spoken – now is the time to listen and act.



## 4. Practical Steps: Moving from Transition to Transformation

### CONCERNS AND PRIORITIES OF THE NEW MOVEMENT

Every disaster recovery involves three crucial stages: triage, transition, and transformation. The passage from triage to the next steps is always difficult. When a flood, fire, or tornado hits, everyone is engaged in rescuing and meeting immediate needs. Then comes the clean-up period, where the debris of decades of work and memories is hauled away. Cleaning up the devastated past and restoring some sense of routine and normalcy consumes great energy and emotion.



Simply putting flood victims back where they were is only a short-term solution. The memories and community relationships will not be restored as they were. Even more significantly, restoring occupants to live in a flood plain without major improvements—raising houses, building levees, or rebuilding on higher ground—only guarantees continuation of the same anguish and devastation moving forward.

Most natural disasters ravage over a period of days. For the inconceivable period of more than 18 months, educators, students, and parents have been simultaneously engaged in educational survival and triage. Now school systems are moving into a transition stage where they resume in-person school. Many state they do not want to return to the

inadequate systems that existed pre-COVID-19. At the same time, they also recognize the record resources available to rebuild and re-imagine their systems. This is a critical period for deciding whether there will be genuine transformation of the education system or just a return to an unsatisfactory status quo. Yet the very real practical challenge is how to find the time and energy to plan a course of action, consult experts, and implement effective policies when people and systems are severely stressed.

As our education leaders consider how best to move forward from transition to transformation, they must both honor the value of and need for thoughtful planning and leverage the flexibility they have in using federal funds. The rest of this chapter provides some specific recommendations for doing so.

## Planning for transformational change

Effective planning will need to consider both where our education systems are, as well as where they've been and where we want them to go. More specifically:

- 1. Redefine the learning objectives that are desired and then plan how to achieve them.** In many cases, education systems had defined their goals before the pandemic. Now education leaders must determine whether these objectives are still sufficient or if they need to be changed in this new era. These goals must also reflect student and family needs; polling data is one of the best methods to capture stakeholder priorities.
- 2. Decide what lessons have been learned from the COVID-19 shutdown and what is valuable to retain or expand.** For instance, one positive lesson may be that some teachers excelled at virtual teaching. Can we imagine a model where these teachers provide virtual instruction to many students across different schools, while the classroom teacher provides the hands-on instruction and support? Other schools saw how learning can occur in many settings outside the traditional school. What did each school succeed and struggle with? How did schools fare with broadband connectivity or absenteeism? What strategies can we take away or share with other schools?

- 3. Constantly emphasize that the goal is not to add more layers of activity to already stressed teachers and learners.** As one teacher noted, "You guys have to stop loading up my backpack." The objective is to work together to redesign the backpack, not fill it further. In the same spirit, legislators must consider how this transformation process will impart a gift, or gifts, to all involved so participants feel relief, not more obligation and stress.
- 4. Utilize the COVID Constituency to build support for moving beyond restoration to a vastly improved education system for their children.** The federal relief acts require public engagement; this enables sharing experiences, hardships, and visions of what education should be.
- 5. Respect time needed for emotional and physical recovery.** The opportunity to apply massive federal and state resources at a time when every education system is uprooted will not come again. At the same time, it is highly likely that having endured this lengthy stressful period most educators, including leaders, faculties, administrative personnel, non-academic personnel, and school board members, are not psychologically prepared to vault from basic triage to immediate visioning and redesign. While restoring basic in-person school and campus functions, education leaders must also develop a schedule for a multi-year process of engaging community members and stakeholders in planning, constructing, and executing a vision to transform learning and teaching.

## Using one-time dollars for long-term transformation

With the approval of the three federal COVID-19 relief packages—the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), and the American Rescue Plan (ARP)—most school districts have an unprecedented infusion of dollars through 2024. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) guidelines and recommendations should be carefully reviewed. Additionally, many states that predicted deep deficits now find themselves with unexpected resources that can also be applied to education. Finally, in addition to almost \$300 billion being directed to education, Congress also provided \$350 billion to state and local governments. Much of this can complement education needs such as providing job training or wraparound services.

District and education leaders should not be daunted by the administrative guidelines, regulations, and prescribed time limits for obligating these funds. Everyone should understand that these one-time funds have extensive flexibility in redesigning and improving a school system.

### ***States should allow latitude in the approval and review process to maximize the use of federal relief funds at the local level.***

State officials are charged with approving each district's spending plans and overseeing the commitment and obligation of school districts. ED is emphasizing that a state may give wide leeway to a district to review and update its plan periodically. Working with school districts to maximize opportunities and allowing continual updates of district plans is the best strategy for wide-scale education improvement. Spending large amounts of federal relief dollars effectively for long-term change will require this flexibility. States must give space to adjust, allowing districts and schools more time to get feedback, plan, and take bold action.

### ***Local districts should use this flexibility to revise their plans and take the time needed to build the desired system.***

A district does not have to lock in its long-term plan within just a few months of the state receiving approval of its plan. Rather, the district most likely has already spent, or is committing, what it needs to make the school safe and healthy for resuming classes. That leaves a large balance for addressing the learning recovery required by the ARP as well as making one-time investments to build the system that is desired. Local leaders should use this time to listen to their constituents and allow them to inform long-term decisions.

### ***States and localities must think about what can be reserved for change efforts.***

For many education systems, reserving much of the federal dollars will be the only opportunity to institute major systems change for the foreseeable future. Each district and state leader will have to adjust to their unique situation giving the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the varied impact it has had. Planning for the future and using reserves strategically will help students, schools, and communities long after the pandemic is over.

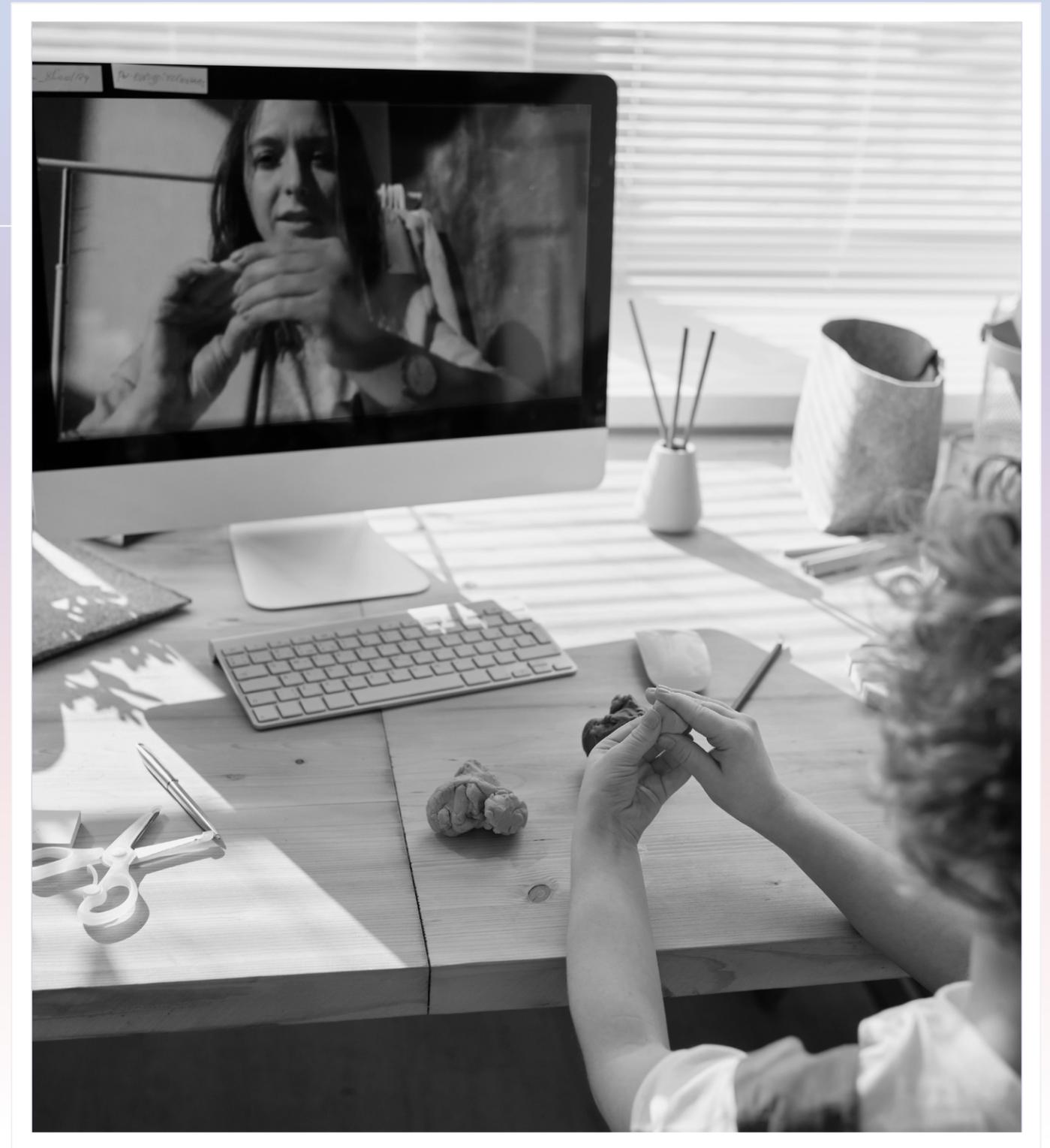
### ***Spotlight State:***

One state is strategically tapping federal relief flexibility to support local school districts in reserving federal relief dollars for long-term change efforts. One innovative state superintendent is advising district school boards and superintendents to spend 25 percent for immediate resumption of school, 25 percent to undertake necessary activities during the next school year to aid learning recovery, and use the remaining 50 percent for conducting the planning, public engagement, and implementation of desired and effective systems change.

## 5. Conclusion

### ON THE PATH TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION

Each day of this global pandemic, leaders at different levels from around the world have made consequential decisions that impact the future of education systems and the students, families, and educators within them. Many education and political leaders talk about this experience as moment of transformational change or a point in history to reflect on what has been learned. It is a time to commit to significant systemic changes that meet the needs of all students and society as a whole for decades to come. The COVID Constituency also knows we must lean into this opportunity and not lose the chance to reshape education at a time when there are unprecedented amounts of federal relief dollars to support these efforts.



## Moving towards transformation

However, it must be fully recognized that a significant challenge to transformation in education remains. Many of our education decision-makers are still in the phase of triage: working to find lost students and addressing missed learning opportunities, while also ensuring students obtain necessary resources and services. Some are now moving into a transition phase, navigating reopening for the 2021–22 school year and focusing on getting students back in classrooms safely, even as new variants loom. This is a critical period for any leader, since there is little time for visionary thinking and implementation amid daily stressors, ranging from installing new HVAC systems to addressing the health and training needs of teachers. After a year and a half of constant stress, educators are understandably leery about having more responsibility heaped onto them. We all must have empathy for the leaders making decisions that impact millions of students across this country during such a tumultuous time.

Transformation cannot readily happen if our leaders are fully occupied in the two other phases. True transformation requires intentionality, genuine desire, and the will to make change, as well as stakeholders and partners to help inform decision-making. This type of change takes time—likely more than just a year. The federally mandated processes for relief funds required quick planning, not likely

the kind of planning necessary for transformative change. But the federal process does allow space to revise those plans and make informed decisions as more data becomes available. Recent federal guidelines recognize the need for district leaders to have more time to prepare meaningful plans for true improvement.

States have the leeway to give districts the necessary time to plan and review periodically. Thus, district leaders can spend a portion of their initial Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to permit safe and effective reopening of schools. They can also simultaneously begin the visioning, strategy development, and implementation that will take several years to accomplish.

Education leaders and policymakers must be realistic. COVID-19 relief funds may be the only major dollars that will be coming to enable significant systemic change. As the economy improves, the U.S. Congress may prove increasingly reluctant to agree to further massive expansions in education spending. Despite calls for doubling the annual federal funding for education, the best that may be realized in 2022 is level funding. This is why our state and local decision-makers must think about leveraging these once-in-a-lifetime funds that last through 2024 to create a lasting impact, long after the federal relief dollars run out.

## Listening to the COVID Constituency

Under the American Rescue Plan (ARP), we commend federal leaders who required “meaningful input and consultation” on student needs from local education agencies during the planning process. It is imperative that we listen to the voices of students, families, and communities who have formed a vision and commitment to the future of public education as a result of this pandemic. As more examples of effective state and district innovations emerge, these initiatives must be widely disseminated to assist others seeking the same ends. The more the COVID Constituency sees how its determined aspirations can be achieved, the more it will support the education leaders and policymakers who take similar bold actions. There have been examples of commitments to getting this input and consultation, and we hope they can continue into the future.

As we have highlighted in this report, a growing movement of parents and voters is forming compelling thoughts on education in this country, and now is the time to listen to their voices and make real change. They want to see our national, state, and local leaders undertaking education changes that reflect the 21st century learning experiences of their children. Decision-makers must continue reviewing education polls conducted during the pandemic and analyze what the findings mean for transformative change. Of course, the best survey comes by engaging with parents and voters now altered by their common COVID-19 ordeal; they have undergone common experiences and have similar hopes and fears for their children’s future as a result of the pandemic.

Despite schools resuming and the first of the federal relief funds being obligated and spent, it is not too late to leverage the COVID Constituency that has formed. There is time for this work to evolve and change. The federal funding streams dedicated for education require various reporting periods, allowing state and local leaders room to revisit their initial plans and report out any needed changes. It may be beneficial to review plans every three or six months, so decision-makers can look for opportunities to make changes while federal relief dollars are available, all while listening to the desires of voters and parents.

A year and a half of economic, education, and personal loss and sacrifice has created a unique experience for most Americans. A bold vision for education is desired in this country. Policymakers will find broad support from an activated public that has developed a much greater appreciation for education and a determination that it be improved. We must listen to the COVID Constituency and enact bold change to support and improve public education in this country. It will be worth the time and investment now, to improve our system for decades to come.

**Decision-makers must continue reviewing education polls conducted during the pandemic and analyze what the findings mean for transformative change.**

**Policymakers will find broad support from an activated public that has developed a much greater appreciation for education and a determination that it be improved.**



## About The COVID Constituency

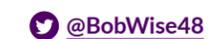
The COVID Constituency is an initiative developed by The Hunt Institute in collaboration with Governor Bob Wise, former U.S. congressman and governor of West Virginia. It seeks to collect firsthand experiences, perceptions, and priorities from students, parents, and teachers, and then translate them into actionable policies that will fundamentally change education for the better. This report anchors this work, providing an initial landscape of existing education opinion surveys conducted since the start of the pandemic and identifying clear and significant public support for bold education initiatives.

This report is part of a larger series of resources that will continue to be released over the next year, including:

- **A public opinion survey further capturing the challenges, perceptions, and priorities overlooked in existing surveys.**
- **Focus group interviews of parents.**
- **A four-part webinar series highlighting survey findings and policy areas of improvement.**
- **Policy briefs, blog posts, and op-ed publications that synthesize and disseminate a variety of research findings through different mediums.**

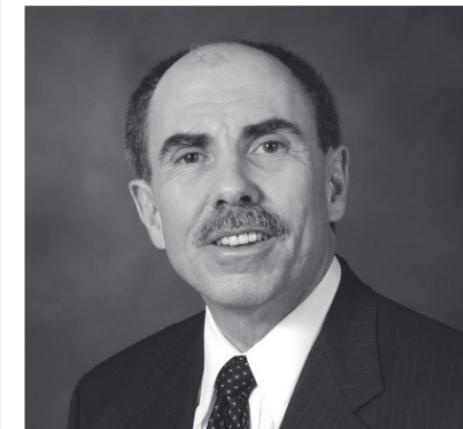
By utilizing multiple outlets to distribute critical information about the policy changes that key stakeholders want to see in education, the initiative offers the Constituency several platforms to lift up and amplify their voices to help inform education transformation in the U.S.

## Governor Bob Wise



Former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise has spent his career advancing education opportunities for our nation's students. In 2019, he completed 14 years as president of the nonprofit Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed), a national leader in advocating the policies and practices necessary for secondary school students to be ready for postsecondary education and careers. He was named one of the ten most influential people in education technology by Tech & Learning and one of NonProfit Times's "Power & Influence Top 50."

He currently coordinates the Global Science of Learning Education Network. Gov. Wise served 24 years as governor, member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and state legislator, and has become a prominent speaker and advisor on education issues and trends.



## Dr. Javaid Siddiqi



Dr. Javaid Siddiqi is the President and CEO of The Hunt Institute. He began his professional career as a high school teacher, assistant principal, and principal in Chesterfield, Virginia. Dr. Siddiqi also served as the Virginia Secretary of Education in Governor Bob McDonnell's cabinet. He is an Aspen Institute Fellow, former Vice-Rector of the Radford University Board of Visitors, and a former member of the Chesterfield County School Board. He currently serves on the Elevate Early Education Board and the National Center for Teacher Residencies Board.



Keep up with the **COVID Constituency initiative**:

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