

COMMENTARY

Our Children's Education Should be a Priority as California Recovers from Coronavirus



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The [coronavirus pandemic](#) has pushed California and the nation into uncharted waters, especially with the impact on our schools.

California schools are some of the nation's poorest funded, with the state ranked 39th in the country in education spending. Recent research has concluded that California would need to spend an additional \$26.5 billion above 2016-17 levels on K-12 education annually to meet the state's goals for student achievement.

Unfortunately, over the past several decades, instead of making much-needed investments in public education, California's leaders have asked districts to exist on razor-thin reserves, absorb rising pension costs, and recruit and retain teachers with salaries that fail to reflect the state's high cost of living. For many districts, the [COVID-19 crisis](#) and the economic hardship accompanying it may be the match in the powder barrel.

With the economy in decline and unemployment on the rise, school funding, which is heavily dependent on personal earnings from stocks, bonds and interest, is likely to dip, and unfunded district pension obligations will grow. This will trigger cuts, which will likely mean layoffs and reductions in critical student services. This financial impact will come when our schools need more money, not less, to serve our state's children.

As I write this, nearly all of the state's [schools are closed](#). Although districts are transitioning to remote learning, most California students will lose months of normal instruction. And COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate [inequities in learning opportunities](#) between California's students.

Some students will have access to academic instruction and enrichment activities during this time. Others, particularly those already behind and underserved, will not have [access to such opportunities](#) and may suffer without the support schools provided to them and their families before the crisis. When students come back to school, whenever that may be, they will need a variety of support to address emergent academic, health and psychological needs.

But if there is any positive lesson in the COVID-19 crisis, it is that our educators are up to the challenge. In the past several weeks, schools have demonstrated their capacity to be innovative, flexible and proactive in serving rapidly evolving public needs.

The closure of schools has made very clear that they are the center of our communities, essential to the very well-being of our state. This crisis has reminded Californians that for students rich and poor, schools are not only places of learning, they also provide social cohesion and safety. And schools make it possible for parents to work and for communities to thrive economically.

For far too many students, schools are the places where they can get what may be the only reliable meal they eat that day. And for some students, school is the main or only place where they receive critical special education or mental health services.

And so, when we rebuild from the damage COVID-19 will likely bring, I am hopeful we will embrace this very basic notion that schools are central to our communities and the vitality of our state.

This crisis has laid bare the long-term underinvestment in our educational system and the resulting gaps in our schools and achievement of our students.

It's time for that to change. While our immediate priority must be protecting the health and safety of our state's residents, at some point in the hopefully not too distant future we will need to reopen our schools. As we do so we need to make the kind of significant investments in our public schools that reflect their true importance to our students, families and future. It should be a priority for California's recovery.

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