

COMMENTARY

In Pandemic's Wake, California Needs to Rethink System of Support for Schools



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When the [coronavirus emergency](#) abates, what happens to California's disrupted education system and how might policymakers respond now?

The double blow of fewer resources and greater needs promises a perfect storm for education in California after the pandemic. Four things are certain:

1. California faces a serious decline in the tax revenue that education relies upon.
2. School closures will adversely affect the academic and social and emotional well-being of all students.
3. The pandemic lays bare the inequities of educational opportunities for children most in need.
4. Educators will need help to address the academic losses and social/emotional needs of their students now and when schools re-open.

While it now seems like a long time ago, Gov. Gavin Newsom's proposed 2020-21 budget included [major investments](#) to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our education system.

These investments included grants to address professional development for educators, teacher and school support staff shortages, and the needs of students living in poverty.

With the dizzying speed and catastrophic impact of the pandemic, these needs will grow. The likelihood, however, that the governor's proposed grants will survive the May revision of the state budget is small.

It is hard to imagine that the state's schools will return to anything remotely like "normal" anytime soon. Now is the time for policymakers to redesign key components of the education system to anticipate the scary future.

The way that California distributes education funding, decides how funds are spent and holds districts and schools accountable for their performance dramatically changed in 2013 with the enactment of the [Local Control Funding Formula](#). The law established that:

1. Districts with high numbers of students with the most needs receive additional funds.
2. Most of the old funding system, where money was earmarked for special purposes and programs, was eliminated. This allowed

districts more flexibility and required parents, teachers, community members and students to have a say in how funds are used.

3. Districts' and schools' performance is measured by multiple indicators, including academic achievement, English-learner progress, chronic absenteeism, graduation rate, suspension rate and college/career readiness.
4. Districts needing assistance (determined by their performance on these indicators) can receive it through the state's system of support from their county office of education.

One of the many examples of how the pandemic has upended California's education systems is how the state's new system of support is suddenly irrelevant and needs to be rethought. At the heart of the system of support is the [California School Dashboard](#), an evaluation tool with multiple indicators of school and district performance. For the 2019-20 school year, nearly one-third of California school districts were identified for [differentiated assistance](#) — a second tier of state and county help — because of poor performance by various student subgroups on two or more indicators.

With schools closed and testing suspended, the 2020 dashboard will not include data on most indicators, which makes identifying districts for differentiated support nearly impossible.

Before the pandemic swept the state, [a recent report](#) that I co-authored with [Jennifer O'Day](#), Institute Fellow at American Institutes for Research, found glaring weaknesses in the system of support.

Among the findings, the dashboard undermines sustained improvement because the districts identified for assistance change year to year and funding for county offices is tied to the number of identified districts. In addition, the timing of dashboard release is out of sync with districts' planning cycles and truncates the amount of time county offices have to assist identified districts.

Moreover, the support side of the system fails to draw upon the full complement of expertise in the state and is not well-aligned with other accountability components of the Local Control Funding Formula, especially the requirement to involve teachers, parents, community members and others in decision-making.

One thing is clear: When the pandemic has run its course, all of California's schools and districts will need help to get back on their feet, and the current system of support will need to be rethought in order to respond to new needs. A redesigned system of support should:

- Draw upon expertise beyond the county offices of education (e.g., non-profits, higher education and district networks).
- Be a multiyear intervention, based on level of need and constantly refined.
- Include opportunities for meaningful involvement of teachers, parents, community members and others.
- Be driven by locally defined needs that have emerged from the pandemic.

Trying to put Band-Aids on the existing system is certainly not going to result in better outcomes than those California achieved before the pandemic. As the coronavirus crisis unfolds, policymakers need to take advantage of the disruption to redesign the existing structures, like the system of support, to respond to daunting needs of California's education system.

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