

COMMENTARY

Unprecedented Times Provide Unprecedented Opportunity

Suburban Superintendents Reflect and Reimagine



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The unprecedented closure of schools as a result of the global pandemic has had a dramatic—devastating, even—effect on our communities. In its wake, [COVID-19](#) has exposed persistent inequities in our public school systems and has magnified concerns about providing for students’ [basic needs](#), their [emotional well-being](#), and their [academic progress](#). Yet, as is often the case, hard times lead to opportunities to [reimagine and rebuild](#).

UNPRECEDENTED TIMES HAVE EXPOSED PERSISTENT INEQUITIES

The pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated the many inequities already existing in our public school systems. For suburban school districts, in particular, these inequities were often hidden behind outdated perceptions of homogenous and affluent suburban communities. But, as recently documented in a [report](#) by the [California Education Lab](#), diverse needs, varied educational opportunities, and inequitable outcomes are the reality across California’s nearly 300 suburban school districts. In fact, the diversity of suburban school districts is now similar to that of urban California districts, with a notable decrease in the proportion of students who are White and an increase in the proportion of students who are Latinx over the last decade. While suburban school districts serve proportionately fewer socioeconomically disadvantaged students, English learners, youth in foster care, and children experiencing homelessness compared to urban and rural districts, rates vary dramatically across schools and districts, demanding that education leaders attend to a diverse set of student needs. Along with the diversity of the students served, there are great differences in educational opportunity and academic outcomes across suburban districts. For example, the percentage of third-graders meeting or exceeding standards on the [California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress](#) (CAASPP) ranges from around 10 percent in some districts to near 90 percent in others. In some districts, no high school students take [Advanced Placement](#) (AP) tests, whereas in other districts as many as 76 percent of students engage in this form of college preparation. Likewise, completion of A-G coursework varies from zero to 100 percent of graduates. And while research has documented many demographic and economic shifts, never have the variation and inequities in suburban communities been more visible than during the last year.

In [Modesto City Schools](#), the pandemic exposed the extent of food insecurity and the lack of quality healthcare experienced by children, youth, and families in the community. COVID-19 also uncovered the [digital divide](#): many students did not have the technology or connectivity to access virtual learning activities, and some families did not have the technology skills necessary to navigate online instruction platforms. Moreover, the pandemic unveiled language barriers faced by many families that may have

led to missed information, difficulty communicating with teachers and school personnel, and ultimately students' inability to access instructional activities and engage in learning.

In the [Ontario-Montclair School District](#) (OMSD), COVID-19 illuminated inequities in home learning environments and extracurricular activities that became critical when school-based services were suspended or reduced. Research evidence is clear about the [benefits of preschool and early learning](#), but when the pandemic materialized in spring 2020, daycares and schools closed. In many middle-class homes in OMSD, parents supported their children's literacy development and early learning skills—or hired someone else to do this. However, for low-income families, the time and resources for structured learning activities often did not exist. Similarly, prior to the pandemic, many students in OMSD participated in subsidized extracurricular and cocurricular activities—or [expanded learning](#)—such as sports, music, and/or academic and social clubs. The pandemic shuttered those activities. Families with financial means continued extracurricular activities in some form (even if it was piano lessons through Zoom), while lower income families were unable to replicate or substitute school-sponsored activities with privately offered and funded pursuits. As such, the pandemic exposed and exacerbated both the preparation gap and the opportunity gap.

UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITIES

Pandemic provokes conditions for change

While these inequities are not new, what is new as the result of COVID-19 is the readiness for change. In fact, the global pandemic may well have engendered the conditions necessary to address these inequities head-on. By exposing the inequities that were hidden to so many, the pandemic has elevated the need and the will to reimagine and rebuild our public school systems and their collaboration with community, health and social service organizations.

In OMSD, the pandemic did not dramatically alter the philosophical vision of how best to effectively address deep-seated inequities. It did, however, speed up the change process. While the district has embraced the full-service community school model for a long time, we are now, for the first time ever, working in concert with the city planner to expand children and youth programs.

In Modesto City Schools, the shift to remote learning in spring 2020 and the need to plan for continued distance learning, hybrid instruction models, and a return to in-person learning during the 2020–21 academic year compelled creativity and innovation. Personnel pivoted quickly to embrace new ideas and new technologies. As a result, we are better problem-solvers than ever before. Teachers and staff are more open to change and are eager to put the needs of students and families at the forefront of their work.

Reimagining and rebuilding

With this elevated will and readiness for change, educators and community partners are reimagining the future of schooling with equity at the center. And the infusion of [federal and state funds for coronavirus aid](#), relief, and response is making this possible.

From the start, leaders in Modesto City Schools viewed the pandemic as a catalyst for reimagining relationships among schools, students, families, and community partners. Moving forward, we are supplying laptops to all students as early as Transitional Kindergarten and are providing technical support to students and families. This will allow us to more seamlessly integrate technology in student learning, foster improved technology skills for students and parents, and close the digital divide. Additionally, state and federal funding is facilitating the expansion of mental health supports for staff and students alike; we are scaling our partnership with community mental health providers and hiring school-based clinicians. Moreover, we are reimagining instruction delivery and honoring student voice and choice. For example, as a result of lessons learned about online teaching and learning, we are working to expand access to college preparatory and AP classes through virtual course offerings. We are also redesigning our Alternative Education and Career Technical Education programs to ensure that students earn college credits while they are in high school and learn the technical skills required to launch their careers.

In Ontario-Montclair School District, pandemic relief funding is serving as a vehicle for transforming the school system. Building on work started in 2017, we are leveraging these new funds to further develop our [Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) by providing targeted staff for direct student services with the aim of closing the achievement gap and meeting the academic, behavior, and social-emotional needs of all.

Policy mechanisms to sustain change

While we are hopeful and optimistic about the future, we know that to sustain a reimagined school system will require policy mechanisms and regulatory conditions to change as well. In order to sustain change, districts need:

1. Flexibility and support to address student needs

Local needs are unique. No two districts are the same, especially when considering the [diversity of suburban districts](#), where the proportion of low-income students ranges from 1 to 95 percent; the proportion of students who are English learners ranges from <1 to 62 percent; and the proportion of students who are experiencing homelessness varies from zero to a startling 36 percent across districts.

Each district, therefore, needs the flexibility to spend money and redesign instructional programs to meet the unique set of needs within their local area and to holistically nurture students' development. The infusion of money resulting from numerous federal and state relief bills needs to be spent in ways that affect students long beyond the spend down of funds. This means investing in capacity building and partnerships that look different across distinct communities.

Moreover, the pandemic has fundamentally changed how both educators and families view distance learning options. Demand for robust online schooling and hybrid schedules is on the rise. Districts need flexibility in calculating average daily attendance to generate the funding necessary to build and support these learning opportunities. Districts also need flexibility in accounting for instructional minutes in new blended and hybrid learning models.

2. Legislative commitment to ongoing funding

Many school districts have been [inadequately funded](#) for years, especially those suburban school districts that may not meet the unduplicated student count necessary for concentration grant funding but have individual schools with concentrated student need. The influx of federal and state dollars goes a long way in supporting local efforts to reimagine and rebuild our school systems, but one-time funding is not likely to sustain change. When funds are depleted, the capacity of districts to meet the unique needs of all students may be severely reduced.

The state legislature needs to plan for this funding cliff now by raising the base level of funding. Lawmakers need to prioritize policies around equity and must recognize the need for ongoing, sustainable funding to continue program and support services once the COVID-relief funds are no longer available.

As district leaders, we are looking ahead at opportunities that abound. In these most unprecedented times, we are reimagining the future of education based on the celebration of diversity and a focus on equity. And while we are looking forward, in three years' time we want to be able to look in the rearview mirror and be proud of what we accomplished!

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