

COMMENTARY

Strong, Collaborative Labor–Management Relations Can Move Postpandemic Education Forward



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It has been a difficult 18 months, full of unprecedented challenges, new demands, and more than a few setbacks. As we move into fall and the beginning of a new school year, districts are facing myriad decisions, the consequences of which will determine how quickly and effectively they are able to recover from the effects of the pandemic and move education into a [new era](#). This PACE commentary focuses on the kinds of decisions districts and unions are confronting together as well as on the ways in which collaborative labor–management relations can contribute to a stronger education system designed to meet all students’ needs.

It may at first seem counterintuitive to combine the postpandemic rebirth of education with labor–management relations. During the height of the pandemic, teacher unions—one half of the labor–management equation—were roundly denounced (especially in the media, for example in the [Wall Street Journal](#), [Washington Post](#), and [LA Times](#)) for hobbling education. The “but for” argument —“But for teacher unions, students would be back to a normal school schedule”—framed much public and policymaker discourse. Discussions swirled around differing interpretations of what a safe return to school would look like along with the conditions and circumstances that needed to be in place before in-person instruction could resume.

Indeed, labor–management relationships can be fraught. Tense relations in some high-profile districts offered convenient flashpoints as disputes over the speed of reopening schools made headlines. Yet while a few publicly visible districts and their unions received considerable attention, their circumstances do not tell the whole story. A study commissioned by the California Labor Management Initiative (CA LMI) paints quite a different picture of pandemic labor–management relations. [“Grappling with Covid’s Impact on Education: Labor and Management Confront the Crisis,”](#) published in May 2021, drew on data from interviews with superintendents and union leaders in 12 California school districts selected to reflect the state’s geographic, demographic, and economic diversity as well as from a review of the labor–management agreements these districts and their unions negotiated during COVID.

The study found that superintendents and union leaders in 11 of the 12 study districts characterized their prepandemic labor–management relations, those that governed early pandemic agreements, as “collaborative.” These relationships were often newly collaborative, born of leadership changes in the district or union (or both), or of participation in programs designed to equip district and union leaders with skills to lower labor–management temperatures.

Moreover, leaders in 7 of the 12 study sites reported that labor–management relations improved during the pandemic. To be sure, comity was not always easily achieved. District and union leaders were up front about labor–management tensions, noting the challenges of knotty COVID-generated issues. Both sides, however, approached COVID as a shared crisis requiring them to find common ground and a shared solution.

In addition, district and union leaders said they colored outside standard labor–management lines as they developed COVID agreements. Citing mutual concern for student welfare, particularly for students most at risk, labor and management leaders tackled issues such as student access to devices and connectivity, teacher strategies and support for engaging students and their families in remote learning, and ways to attend to students’ increasing social-emotional needs. In the wake of the May 2020 George Floyd murder, racial equity also came to the labor–management fore with more than half the study sites saying they redoubled efforts to address systemic racism and focus on making their districts fairer and more equitable.

As the pandemic hopefully recedes into the background and full return to in-person instruction is on the horizon, where might districts and unions turn their attention as they develop programs and strategies designed to bring about a revitalized education system? My research suggests six priority areas:

1. **Approach post-COVID challenges as common problems requiring common solutions.** The CA LMI study confirmed that, working together, districts and unions could confront and collaboratively address COVID-created challenges. The way was sometimes rocky and solutions to problems not always immediately evident. But tackling COVID issues as shared challenges created the foundation for mutual problem solving. The same principle should apply to post-COVID challenges. Approaching the work of rebuilding education from the vantage point of partners, both of whom have a vested interest in creating a system focused on improving circumstances for students, will likely lead to more productive solutions to the many diverse post-COVID challenges.
2. **Focus on equity.** The pandemic widened education’s already yawning [education equity gaps](#) with COVID taking a disproportionate toll on students of color and those living in poverty. Equity—ensuring that these most vulnerable students have the resources and supports they need to succeed—should be the framing issue for postpandemic change and improvement. As districts and unions develop plans to restructure schooling, achieving equity should be top of mind. To that end, labor and management both need to commit that the voices and perspectives of families and students will be reflected in key decisions.
3. **Allocate resources for sustained impact.** Just a year ago, state officials were forecasting an [\\$18 billion education shortfall](#). Today, California schools have an unanticipated windfall—a guaranteed [\\$15.3 billion dollars in one-time money from the federal government](#) and billions more [from the state](#). Spending this burst of dollars wisely and well presents both challenges and opportunities. While not all resource allocation decisions fall in the labor–management portfolio, many do. These decisions need to be made with an eye towards making significant and lasting changes that directly benefit students.

Districts and unions need to pay attention to appropriating funding for programs, services, and staff (including salaries and benefits) aimed at helping students recoup lost academic time, bringing a sharper focus to closing equity gaps and ensuring they do not reemerge, and meeting the challenges of students’ pandemic-exacerbated social-emotional needs. As they make these decisions, labor–management partners need to give careful consideration to strategies for deploying one-time federal money to ensure programs and policies funded by these dollars do not disappear when the funds do. They also need to be strategic about developing plans that will enable labor–management partners to determine if the programs they put in place are having the desired impact and, if not, how and when to make mid-course changes.

4. **Think critically and creatively about staffing needs.** Resource allocation decisions involve critical determinations about

meeting new and likely more complex staffing requirements. The pandemic ratcheted up students' academic and social-emotional needs. Along with a focused determination to create a more equitable school system, schools require more teachers, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses. Districts and schools may need to add new positions for mentors, tutors, and other specialized staff as well. Meeting students' learning needs may require structural changes, such as grouping students in smaller instructional units, further increasing the need for additional qualified hires. At the same time, districts and unions need to be cognizant that teachers are exhausted; the pandemic took its toll on them too. Thus, labor-management discussions must simultaneously grapple with hiring, training, and assigning new and existing staff while implementing education improvement strategies that do not place further burdens on those currently in the classroom.

5. **Ensure schools remain safe and healthy places to teach and learn.** COVID has not disappeared. New and worrisome variants are still on the rise. Districts and unions need to ensure that schools are safe and healthy places, and that the people who work and learn in these buildings have confidence that this is the case. As schools open for five-day-a-week in-person instruction, districts and unions should be mindful of health and safety policies and practices that might need to be in place. Will schools need to meet special requirements for ventilation systems? Will personal protective equipment (PPE) still be required in some circumstances? How will schools deal with circumstances such as a student or staff member becoming ill with COVID? Labor-management partners need to balance decisions about appropriate actions with careful assessments of up-to-date health and safety information.

6. **Consider giving expanded decision-making authority to school-level labor-management teams.** Finally, extraordinary challenges call for extraordinary responses. Districts and unions should consider a partial shift from centralized collective bargaining by empowering school-level labor-management teams with expanded decision-making authority, better equipping them to adapt to school needs, circumstances, and student populations. School-level labor-management teams might, for example, be authorized to determine student grouping arrangements and class or course organization, make decisions about the length of class periods in secondary schools as well as teacher teaming and specialization arrangements in elementary schools, determine teachers' professional development needs and how to meet them, and decide on staffing requirements and arrangements. To be sure, many details would need to be worked out with care. For example, would decisions be organized within a district-level labor-management framework? What resources would be shifted from district headquarters to schools? Challenges notwithstanding, implementing this kind of targeted, focused school-level decision-making could bring about a new labor-management dynamic that would help schools, and thus districts, achieve their goals to serve all students well.

The new school year offers myriad challenges and opportunities to improve education and build a system based firmly on equity. A solid labor-management partnership prepared to meet these challenges and take advantage of these opportunities is requisite to rebuilding and reinvigorating an education system shattered by COVID-19.

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