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October 6–8, 2021
1:00 PM–6:00 PM ET

Legislative Conference
Madison Hotel
Washington, DC
March 26–29, 2022
features

6 Achieving Racial Justice in PreK-12 Education
State boards have a critical role in the reinvention that progress requires. John B. King Jr. and Denise Forte

11 Designing for Equity
Six principles around which to engage communities in making schools better. Hal Smith

16 Teacher Diversity and Student Success
Grow-your-own programs can help overcome barriers to entry that candidates of color face. Constance A. Lindsay

21 Equity and English Learners Post-Pandemic
Getting a handle on English learners’ opportunities to learn during the pandemic is key to building more resilient supports. Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarín

26 Racial Justice through Expanded Choice
Because address and opportunity have long been interbedded, school choice is all about justice. Derrell Bradford

30 Supporting Youth with the Most Need
Students facing myriad tough challenges deserve integrated support, which would be cost effective as well. Hailly T.N. Korman

36 Engaging Students through Ethnic Studies
California, Connecticut, and Texas offer high school electives that aim for cultural relevance. Woody Exley

40 DC Embeds Antiracist Lens in Update of Social Studies Standards
State board sets a process replete with opportunities for stakeholder input. Jessica Sutter and Alexander Jue

departments

2 editor’s note
3 news & notes
4 student voice
5 state board voice
46 q&a with Maryland board’s Vermelle Greene and Miya Simpson
52 from the president’s pen
Because they are central to redressing the country’s longstanding racial inequities, public schools have long been at the nexus of fraught debates over what constitutes equity. As many states considered measures this year animated by varying interpretations of critical race theory and concerns about its application to K-12 teaching, this tension came into sharper than normal focus.

The debates focused on “what” and “how”: What history do teachers teach? How do they handle hard history and contentious issues? Even as these battles are waged, we hope the questions of why and whether schools have a role in promoting a just society are settled: All children can learn if they receive excellent instruction and equal opportunities to learn, have the supports they need, and feel safe and a sense of belonging at school. It is what justice requires, and yet the country is not there yet.

Our authors address how schools can progress toward equity. John B. King Jr. and Denise Forte of Education Trust remind readers of both the progress made and areas where obstacles stand in the way: social, emotional, and academic development; educator equity and diversity; and early childhood education. Hal Smith at the National Urban League outlines principles his colleagues use, and state boards can use, in leveraging community assets to tackle policies that foster inequity.

Constance A. Lindsay of University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill outlines how educator diversity improves student outcomes and thus is a marker of workforce quality. Derrell Bradford at 50CAN reviews the troubled legacy of segregated schools and housing and explains how expanding school choice is fundamentally a racial justice proposition.

Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarín of the Migration Policy Institute address the plight of English learners during the pandemic and how states can build resilient systems to address these learners’ needs. As Hailly T.N. Korman at Bellwether Education Partners argues, if states can build coherent, silo-bridging systems to help students with the greatest needs learn—including those in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and those experiencing homelessness—they can truly help all children.

Several state boards have advanced initiatives to promote equity. Jessica Sutter and Alexander Jue of the DC State Board of Education stress the importance of process and stakeholder engagement in crafting new social studies standards. Connecticut board member Woody Exley highlights new ethnic studies courses in his state, Texas, and California. Arizona board member Janice Mak urges boards to combat the fresh wave of discrimination against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

Vermelle Greene and Miya Simpson of the Maryland State Board of Education describe the work of the Task Force on Achieving Academic Equity and Excellence for Black Boys, which Greene chaired. She pressed the state’s education department to give the board data disaggregated by race and gender, and the board found the results stark and alarming. After plumbing the research and promising practices, she and colleagues laid out recommendations in 2020 that pilot schools will be implementing. “By helping our Black boys, you’re going to help all of our students,” Greene said. “We want to show proof of concept in Maryland so that other states can do this as well.”
Since passage of the American Rescue Plan Act in March, the White House’s legislative agenda almost singularly focused on securing passage of $3 trillion for infrastructure, including traditional projects like roads and bridges, school construction, and broadband facilities, alongside direct investments in the nation’s workforce. Following weeks of negotiations, the Biden administration announced a much more modest, but still large, $1 trillion deal with a bipartisan group of 20 senators, which the Senate approved (69-30) on August 10. If the deal holds in the House, the White House and congressional leaders will be able to claim a bipartisan victory. Senate Democrats also took the first step in August toward passing a second partisan infrastructure bill that will include ambitious education, childcare, and workforce development provisions excluded from the bipartisan deal. The White House has said it will work with Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill to try to move both measures on a similar timeline after the long August recess.

In June, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona published proposed supplemental priorities and related definitions for future discretionary grants. They include the following:

- addressing the impact of COVID-19 on students, educators, and faculty;
- promoting equity in student access to resources, opportunities, and welcoming environments;
- supporting a diverse educator workforce and professional growth to strengthen student learning;
- meeting student social, emotional, and academic needs;
- increasing postsecondary education access, affordability, completion, and postenrollment success; and
- strengthening cross-agency coordination and community engagement to advance systemic change.

In June, the Federal Communications Commission launched the $7.1 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund to help schools meet the home broadband and device needs of students and staff. The initial application window is focused on offsetting broadband and device costs that schools will incur from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022. If any funding remains after the first round of applications, the FCC may invite schools to seek reimbursement for home connectivity costs they incurred previously, back to March 1, 2020. Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) and Representative Grace Meng (D-NY) announced a plan in July to seek funding to continue the program.

Legislators are also working on the fiscal 2022 federal budget and are considering increased spending levels for the U.S. Department of Education. The House Appropriations Committee approved a bill in July that would provide a historic 41 percent increase in ED funding, including nearly doubling the size of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act’s Title I program and significantly increasing funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and other key education programs important to state and local leaders. The full House likely will approve the measure, but with Senate appropriators moving more slowly and given the minority’s opposition to many spending changes the House seeks, it may not be possible to complete the appropriations process by October 1. If Congress is unable to act by that deadline, legislators will be forced to pass a continuing resolution to permit the federal government to operate.

Figure 1. Teachers who took diversity coursework before first year of teaching, by area and year they began teaching (percent)

Student Voice

Finding Hope by Finding a Voice

In a year riddled with both crises and complacency, young people were at the forefront of some of the nation’s largest movements. I co-lead the Kentucky Student Voice Team, which comprises over 100 students from across the state who are working to advance education research, advocacy, and policy. We rallied in solidarity, advocated against legislation we saw as a threat to the integrity of our democracy, and sought answers to some of the toughest questions threatening public schools. Rather than checking off a box called “student engagement,” we sought to amplify student experiences as a means to drive change.

During statewide school closures due to COVID-19, our team created what became the largest student-led research study in the state. Reaching nearly 13,000 students from all 120 Kentucky counties, “Coping with COVID” offered a perspective on the social-emotional and learning experiences of Kentucky students and proposed policy recommendations that were shared with education policymakers, educators, and school administrators. Among several findings, the study shone a light on disparities in resources for underserved schools across the state, impacts of infrequent teacher-student communications, and the ways in which students’ postsecondary plans had drastically transformed. During the 2020 presidential elections, our team also focused on down-ballot races affecting public education, organizing and moderating school board town halls for our communities.

The team brought the same drive to efforts to preserve the space for student and educator voice when a March legislative proposal threatened the dedicated teacher and student seats on the Kentucky Board of Education. In response, our team developed the #SaveOurSeats campaign, calling on the support of equity-oriented education and civic organizations to stand in solidarity. Over 300 students, educators, parents, and allies signed on to our campaign to share the same message: The presence and participation of students and teachers on state boards model democratic decision making.

Mostly, however, our activism has been rooted in storytelling. Through the Student Voice Forum and the Get Schooled: Student Stories from Across Kentucky podcast, we amplify narratives in order to radically reimagine public education.

There isn’t a single kind of activism that could eradicate the achievement and opportunity gaps in our education system. As the consumers in our education system, students are uniquely positioned to present real-world solutions to real-world problems. It is inexplicable to hinder young people’s agency to promote change.

Democracy thrives when primary stakeholders are brought into the picture. Our version of a just world is one that resists reactive measures but remains proactive. A world that confronts policies that sound good but fail to do good. A world that finds value in intergenerational partnerships and youth agency. A world devoid of social, economic, and racial crisis in which the youngest generation can sustain their youthfulness and find hope by claiming power.
While everyone experienced school year 2020–21 as unlike any other, for me and millions of other Asian Americans, it was particularly painful to live through a parallel pandemic. Given the violence against the most vulnerable of the community of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) that plays out in news report after news report, with women and the elderly attacked and even killed, it is not surprising that Asian Americans reported more stress from anti-Asian racism than from COVID-19 itself.

There is evidence of this stress in families and schools. Almost 7 in 10 Asian American K-12 students were still learning exclusively online even in February 2021, according to a U.S. Department of Education survey. This stress was also evident when my sister, due to daily reports of anti-Asian incidents, forbade my family to take the subway when we were visiting her in New York City. It was evident when two members of the AAPI community in Arizona gave public comment to the Arizona State Board of Education not only about the anxiety they feel for their children going to school but also about the lack of representation of AAPI in the curriculum. These comments illuminated what the larger AAPI population is sensing at this moment: a struggle to be seen and to feel safe.

At a NASBE New Member Institute, I learned that all state boards have three critical powers: adopting and revising policies that promote educational excellence and equity, convening experts and stakeholders to serve as a bridge between policymakers and citizens, and raising questions. I was reminded that my colleagues and I can leverage these combined powers with and for students, educators, and families.

The New York Board of Regents set out to do precisely this with its release of guidance about how to create more equity in school curricula. Chancellor Lester Young said, “We recognize the role that race and racism plays, and we recognize our obligation to remove barriers.” Citing a rise in local anti-Asian hate incidents, the DC State Board of Education released a statement of solidarity with the AAPI community during their April meeting, committing to greater investment in restorative justice and social-emotional supports. In July, Illinois became the first state to require public schools to teach a unit of Asian American history, starting in the 2022–23 school year. In Arizona, the AAPI community will be represented on the Equitable and Inclusive Practices Advisory Council; having a seat at the table is a first step in the journey to being seen. Together, state boards are helping AAPI students be seen and feel safe.

As Yvonne So, board chair of the Greater Phoenix Chapter of OCA, put it: “Chinese immigration to Arizona precedes our statehood…. Nevertheless, we tend to brush over these chapters of our history, and they are often ignored within today’s classrooms and public discourse. More than ever, it is important to recognize that our roots in this nation run deep and our accomplishments to the social, economic, and cultural fabric of America are valued, appreciated, and celebrated.”
Progress is possible. Back to normal is not good enough.

John B. King Jr. and Denise Forte

The road to achieving racial justice in our nation is marked by times of unspeakable tragedy followed by resilience and recovery and unexpected setbacks overcome by reinvention. Our family stories provide undeniable proof that progress is possible. For example, in just three generations, John’s family went from being enslaved in a cabin in Montgomery County, Maryland, to being represented in the Cabinet of the nation’s first Black president.

The road to racial justice in education is much the same. Enslaved people being denied the chance to read or write and their descendants denied the chance to sit in integrated classrooms or walk the campuses of public institutions are all horrid vestiges of our past. Yet today, descendants of the enslaved are intellectual powerhouses on the campuses of these same institutions, shaping the educational excellence of generations to come. Again, incontestable evidence that progress is possible.

As the nation emerges from a devastating and deadly pandemic, we stand again on the precipice of recovery and reinvention. Many school districts have returned to normal, with the majority of students and teachers back in the classroom. Yet what is needed to propel us toward a more just society is a collective understanding that we cannot just go back to normal. The pandemic illuminated a narrative that the advocates for racial justice in education have been working tirelessly to both highlight and change: Normal was not good enough, especially for students of color. And despite much progress in providing opportunities and access in service of educational equity, disturbing racial inequities remain.

These inequities stand squarely in the way of achieving racial justice in schools. As long as students of color remain less
would have all the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to succeed and thrive. They would be exposed to outstanding, diverse, caring educators who have high expectations for them and believe in their capacity to succeed. They would feel welcomed in their school environments by adults who affirm their cultural identities and recognize the strengths and assets of all students. They would benefit from leaders who are not afraid to confront their own biases and who know that doing so is essential to supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic development. And an equitable, racially just K-12 funding system would provide significantly more dollars to districts to meet the needs of students who have been underserved for years.

As regulators and advocates, state boards of education have a crucial role to play in creating an equitable education system. In a racially just education system, these disparities would not exist. Students of color would likely be assigned to the strongest teachers,\(^1\) less likely to have access to school counselors,\(^2\) and less likely to be enrolled in advanced coursework,\(^3\) schools are not preparing all students for college and career success. As long as Black students are more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline,\(^4\) and Black girls are five times more likely than White girls to be suspended at least once from school,\(^5\) school discipline policies are derailing learning for countless students. And as long as districts with the most Black, Latino, and Native American students continue to spend almost $2,000 less per student per year in state and local funding than districts with mostly White students,\(^6\) state funding formulas are robbing communities of color of much-needed resources (figure 1).

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Reading this figure: In states shaded in green, the highest poverty districts receive at least 5 percent more in state and local funds per student than the lowest poverty districts; in states shaded in blue, they receive at least 5 percent less. Gray shading indicates similar levels of funding for the highest and lowest poverty districts. This figure shows that Illinois’ highest poverty districts received 19 percent less in state and local funds than its lowest poverty districts. Note: Data from Ohio are excluded from this chart because of anomalies in the way Ohio reported its fiscal data to the federal government. Hawaii was excluded because it is one district, the District of Columbia was excluded because it is not a state, and Alaska and Nevada are also excluded because their student populations are heavily concentrated in certain districts and could not be sorted into quartiles. Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and West Virginia are also excluded because students of color make up less than 10 percent of enrollment in these states.

Source: The Education Trust

www.nasbe.org
and maintaining a racially just system, from setting the requirements for teacher and school leader preparation programs so they foster a diverse workforce, to establishing statewide learning standards that require culturally relevant teaching and curriculum. State education leaders also have the power to ensure that such policies do not fall victim to politically driven, misguided attacks, such as the slew of opportunistic state legislative bans against teaching the truth of our nation’s history under the cynical banner of opposing critical race theory. These bans take away educators’ ability to acknowledge the hard parts of U.S. history and students’ rights to learn about them. As the nation continues its reckoning on racism and racial injustice, schools have to be places where critical conversations around unjust systems are not just required but welcomed.

Whether it be in our nation, education system, state, or district, achieving racial justice is possible. It demands unwavering leadership committed to pursuing ideals despite unexpected setbacks and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. There is no set formula or framework; there is only resilience and reinvention. At every challenge, leaders must be willing to make decisions that put the needs of students who are the most vulnerable first. In the wake of what has inarguably been an equity disaster and one of the most challenging periods for many students, educators, and communities of color, state boards should focus on a few priorities as this school year begins: leveraging new federal funding; social, emotional, and academic development; educator diversity; and early childhood education.

**COVID-19 Relief Funds**

Money alone will not solve the deeply embedded systemic inequities students face. Yet when used strategically, it can act as a catalyst for change. Over the past year, the federal government has made an unprecedented investment in education—approximately $195 billion for K-12 education—by way of COVID-19 relief funds. The American Rescue Plan Act alone provides states and districts with about $125 billion. This influx must be directed toward eradicating pre-COVID inequities, which means targeting dollars to the schools and districts that need it most to reverse the many decades of underfunding and doing so in a way that mobilizes the right combination of resources.

It is essential to engage communities of color in the decision making around how federal funding will be used to support students and redesign public education to ensure that all students are prepared for college and career success. Fortunately, the federal government is requiring states to do this as a condition of receiving federal dollars. Too often, leaders fail to involve families of color in creating the policies that impact them or to center their input when considering changes to existing policies. That must change.

**Social, Emotional, and Academic Development**

Even before the pandemic, educators were stepping up efforts to address students’ social and emotional well-being. In the wake of the pandemic and tragic, recurrent displays of racial injustice, this need has been heightened. Yet while many schools and districts report they are supporting students’ social and emotional learning, many are not doing so in ways that support growth for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

When researchers at our organization, The Education Trust, asked students and families of color what they felt would support student’s social and emotional development, they said it was more critical to address systemic racism in schools than to adopt stand-alone socioemotional skill-building curricula. Instead of focusing on changing student behavior, leaders should focus on shifting adult mind-sets to recognize the strengths and assets of all students and on changing systems and policies. Too often, the focus is on fixing kids and not on fixing systems.

State leaders should ask themselves if policies meant to support students’ social and emotional well-being are creating a system that fosters student belonging, helps students thrive, and provides the academic and holistic supports students need. Do students of color see themselves in the curriculum—that is, in the narrative of history presented or in the authors they study? Are students of color more likely to be suspended out of school, or are there...
disparities in how some students are disciplined for the same infraction? These are the sorts of questions that will help leaders shift their focus from correcting individual student behavior to improving the learning environment.

**Educator Equity and Diversity**

In a racially just education system, students of color would also see themselves in those teaching in the classroom and leading schools. And all students would have the chance to be taught by diverse educators. The benefits of students learning from diverse educators are well-known (see article, page 17). Yet state leaders still struggle to recruit and retain teachers of color, leaving many public schools without any teacher of color on record. In fact, in one-third of the 33 states that make student-level data available, more than one in three students attend a school without a single teacher of color. At the same time, targeted state policies and programs to promote educator diversity vary widely across states, making it difficult for state leaders to know with certainty what works best to recruit, retain, and support teachers of color.

State leaders looking to make measurable progress in recruiting and retaining more teachers of color must have access to useful, timely workforce data to set goals and lay out a path for improvement. Using research-backed policy and practice criteria, they also must be able to assess the quality of educator diversity policies in their state. They can start by asking if the policies in their state are doing the following:

- providing visible, actionable data on the diversity of the educator workforce;
- setting clear goals for increasing the racial diversity of the workforce;
- investing in educator preparation programs to increase enrollment and improve the preparation of teachers of color;
- targeting resources to districts and schools for efforts to recruit and hire a diverse teaching workforce; and
- investing in efforts to retain teachers of color, including improving working conditions and providing opportunities for personal and professional growth for teachers of color.

While Ed Trust’s policy scan finds that no state is fully meeting every aspect of these criteria, many are implementing promising practices from which equity-focused state leaders can learn.11

Once established, maintaining effective policies will be critical. As states inevitably face tough budget decisions down the road, many schools and districts will face pressures that imperil their teacher diversity efforts. In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2009, schools serving more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds bore the brunt of hiring freezes and layoffs. Teachers of color are particularly vulnerable to layoffs because they are more likely to be novice teachers, concentrated in high-needs schools, and subjected to systemic and overt racism. State leaders committed to a more equitable, racially just system must protect educators of color from disproportionate staffing cuts and hiring freezes, which may require overriding seniority-based layoff requirements.

**Early Childhood Education**

The benefits of high-quality early childhood education reach well into adulthood. Yet early childhood education is not treated as a public good on par with K-12 education. The Biden administration’s push for targeted investments to expand access to universal pre-K is encouraging and long overdue. Unsurprisingly, the racial inequities and opportunity gaps that plague the K-12 system exist in early childhood as well. When states do fund high-quality preschool programs, Black and Latino children have less access to them. In a report examining the accessibility and quality of state-funded preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-old Black and Latino children, Ed Trust researchers found that no state provides high-quality and high-access early childhood education for these children.12 A racially just education system must address these disparities.

State leaders, including state boards, have an important role in helping develop and support a high-quality early educator workforce. They can use their leverage to ensure better training and compensation. Early educators are essential to the national social and care infrastructure, but policies consistently undervalue them and uphold systemic racial and gender inequities.
Even before the pandemic, childcare workers were some of the lowest paid in the nation. Almost half of the early education workforce relies on public assistance programs. More than one in six female childcare workers lives below the poverty line, and Black and Latina childcare workers with children of their own are more than twice as likely to live below the poverty line. To be sure, racial pay disparities existed before the pandemic. Even when controlling for education level, Black early educators earn an average of 78 cents less per hour than their White counterparts. Latina early educators are more likely than their White or Black peers to work in assistant teacher or aide roles and less likely to work as a teacher. Compensation is especially low for educators who care for infants and toddlers—whose brains are developing most rapidly—and this low pay disproportionately affects Black educators.

**Learning from Schools and Districts**

While much remains to be done to achieve racial justice and equity in our education system, there are schools and districts all over the country where longstanding inequities are no longer a part of the narrative. In these environments, Black, Latino, and Native American children, and children whose families face economic hardships have the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to thrive. And it shows in the data. For years, Ed Trust has been telling the stories of high-performing, rapidly improving schools and, most recently, districts, where students of color and students from low-income backgrounds continuously outperform their peers. In episodes of the ExtraOrdinary Districts podcast, educators and school and district leaders share what they know about developing systems and changing their practices and processes to meet the needs of the students who have faced the most systemic injustices.

When the pandemic started, these proven leaders shared what they were doing to continue meeting students’ needs. Buoyed by the confidence of knowing first-hand that progress is possible despite seemingly insurmountable odds, they went to work—determined not to fail but committed to being truthful too. “We’re brave, not perfect,” was one principal’s motto for her team. “It’s hard every day,” said another leader, “but we know what we have to do as a district to keep us moving forward.” That message is one that should inspire state leaders committed to creating a more equitable education system: It’s hard every day, but you too know what we need to do as a nation to keep us moving forward toward racial justice in our schools.

11. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
After years of education system reforms that, at best, tinker at the system’s edges, generations of families and students remain systemically marginalized, underserved, underprepared, and undereducated. COVID-19 has only made starker and more urgent the unfinished work of ensuring that all students receive an excellent education.

It is time to do something different. Rather than hurry back to the familiar, leaders on state boards of education must take a whole community approach to supporting equity and ending those that don’t.

Hal Smith
Striving for equity and upending inequity are directly tied to the ways that state boards define the problem and consider the policy solutions before them.

1. Acknowledge Working and Operational Definitions of Equity

Many local and state education agencies, as well as state boards of education, have adopted equity statements and defined educational equity and excellence. These definitions can be important markers of what educators and policymakers intend for students to know and be able to do and the range of investments, supports, and opportunity that each student can expect as they are educated. Ideally, the definitions were developed alongside stakeholders, coalitions, parents, partners, and students.

In other places, education leaders have failed to come to consensus on the need for a deliberate, substantive focus on equity and a process for clarifying what equity means and how that differs from equality—or even whether equity is a worthy goal or a key part of their mission. Others refuse to engage in equity conversations altogether. In any case, equity definitions are not meant to be static, as stakeholders will want to develop a definition that best represents current conditions, opportunities, and threats and is responsive to new data, indicators, and voices.

This work is always messy and complicated and requires policymakers to remain steadfast in the face of opposition to upending inequity and charting new ways forward toward realizing the promise of public education. Legitimate questions will arise about how the issues are framed, the evidence presented, the diagnosis of the problem, and the range of potential solutions. These take time to work through. Even in the face of fierce opposition, there will be those that proudly and loudly stand with policymakers who take on this critical work.

As state policymakers encounter legitimate critique and build understanding, some stakeholders will question the legitimacy and reach of the process, others will react strongly to what they fear will be lost in a zero-sum game where only some students get to succeed, and others will intentionally miscategorize intent and vision as overreach or stir up problems where none exist.

In such a climate, it is critically important to understand that striving for equity and upending inequity in a state education system are directly tied to the ways that state boards define the problem and consider the policy solutions before them. How will your board promote and defend the idea that all students deserve an equitable, high-quality education? Conversely, how will the board promote the idea that some students deserve less than its best efforts?

NUL defines education equity as an ongoing process of removing historic barriers and creating a system of opportunity by which all children and youth have the necessary resources to reach their full potential. It is a working definition, continually refined and sharpened over time to better guide NUL’s work, partnerships, and vision.

Whether or not it has a working definition of equity, every district, state, and community has an operational definition of equity—whether acknowledged or not. By that, I mean a definition that is codified in the decisions, policies, investments, and practices that are made daily, in every meeting and hearing, with every policy and budget allocation. Operational definitions of equity are tangible artifacts of equity and inequity found in policy manuals, laws, budgets, and the minutes of public and private meetings.

In the aggregate, these individual decisions and policies are the operational definitions of equity that reveal a system’s implicit values, priorities, and vision for students. Who and what ideas are privileged? From whom is opportunity withheld, or how is its distribution aligned to race and gender, preconceived notions of ability, or the neighborhood or region from which students come? Which set of exceptions proves the rule? Are there districts and schools with higher levels of turnover or family mobility and homelessness? The end of eviction moratoria will doubtless bring added instability into students’ and even some staff’s lives. Are current policies or those under consideration up to this challenge?

Even the most nuanced, beautifully worded working definition of equity still must be tested against the operational definition, for
that is where aspiration meets substance, poetry negotiates with prose, and the ideal crashes against history, legacy, politics, and practicability. Over 20 years ago, states and districts trumpeted the idea that all children can learn, with little investment in the kinds of things that actually work in education. It became a slogan floating in the ether, unmoored to research, policy, or investment, more an aspiration than a guide for conducting the education of children. Did districts hire differently using this notion as a foundation? Did states then set new standards for teacher certification or additional measures of success tied to a range of indicators, or did the nation double down on the most restrictive, punitive approaches to measuring educator impacts?

The “all children can learn” frame did not require leaders of systems to finish the sentence by stating what they would provide to maximize students’ learning and development. Definitions of equity illuminate the explicit and implicit definitions of equity in a state, city, and district and can help policymakers and stakeholders understand what more they can do and do very differently.

2. Understand the Role of Narrative Change

Narrative and language shifts are at the root of innovation and reform because they signify not just a change in how education leaders talk about an issue but different thinking as well: how they conceive of a problem or opportunity, analyze data and indicators, work, invest, and ultimately expand the aperture so a new vision can emerge.

However, changes in language and narrative not accompanied by shifts in policy, investment, or outcomes strip the words of their power. Over the past 24 months, policymakers and stakeholders alike have fretted over using the “right” phrasing on equity without similarly engaging the hard work of reform, innovation, and implementation. Such rhetorical shifts may enable leaders to appear thoughtful but require only mimicry rather than action and celebrate symbolism over systemic change in the service of students and families.

For instance, NUL and others have insisted on a shift from “learning loss” in favor of “instructional loss” as a framing for the challenge ahead. I see this shift as more than rhetorical, as it represents an understanding that learning and development took place for students even as that learning extended beyond strict definitions of academics and seat time.

Because of school building closures due to the pandemic, there are estimates that project massive instructional loss for vulnerable populations, including students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and English learners. Yet students did continue learning under COVID-19, even if formal instruction stopped for a time or was limited in fundamental ways. How do educators build upon what students did learn about themselves, the world, civic engagement, leadership, their interests, and passions? Such an asset-based approach does not presume that students’ brains remained frozen in time, unengaged and empty absent their presence in a school building.

An asset-based approach does not ignore the need to materially and meaningfully address what students know and are able to do but instead starts by recognizing growth and potential across multiple dimensions and indicators or looks at existing indicators quite differently. For example, staff at Attendance Works have long argued that educators and policymakers should define and capture data on chronic absence so that stakeholders can improve conditions for learning. What are the conditions in a school, community, and district that invite students in, and what are the conditions that undermine regular attendance? How might state boards establish common definitions of chronic absence and student engagement that promote prevention and intervention and support districts and schools in identifying factors that contribute to students missing school?

Similarly, emphasizing acceleration, not remediation, is the right framing for education practice and policy. It calls for educators and state leaders to consider expanded strategies, practices, and investment. Rather than doubling down on skill drills, with extra math and reading in isolation from other content, educators ought to more deeply engage students, opening up the curriculum and thinking differently about pedagogy. Remediation assumes that students cannot master new skills without fully understanding all the prior elements of a subject. Acceleration presents an alternative focused on providing students with what they need to be successful in today’s lessons so they

States and districts trumpeted the idea that all children can learn, with little investment in the kinds of things that actually work in education.
are on track to meet tomorrow’s challenges and opportunities squarely.6

3. Reconsider Time and Resources

Another example of authentic narrative change would be to speak about time differently. Given that the funding under the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER II and III) bills can be obligated into 2024, why not consider what a state, district, and school can accomplish over that horizon rather than focusing on summer, quarters, semesters, and academic years?

There is already great pressure to use ESSER funds in one-time bursts rather than as a part of long-term planning, which makes great fiscal sense. However, is it possible to consider foundational investments to spur and drive long-term change? If so, districts and schools would invest the one-time allocations to build the infrastructure and policy environment that will support reform and innovation for the long run.

States and districts could, for example, work with out-of-schooltime providers, business, and industry to design career and technical education content and experiences that let all students explore pathways both for academic credit and toward industry certification and to build critical relationships with a wider array of adults. States can invest in pipelines that support a more diverse educator workforce or develop a shared approach to professional development and training for all child- and youth-serving agencies, including but not limited to schools. They can re-envision the supports offered to those who are asked to “turn schools around” as well as those that need to be prepared to lead with an equity lens.

The partnerships and coalitions necessary to plan for, engage, and implement deep, meaningful reform can be supported over the next three years to alter how state and local education agencies invest over the next three decades. Together, they can use near-term federal resources to alter the trajectory of a generation of students.

There is great flexibility associated with these funds. Rather than retreat to a familiar stance, states and districts should take advantage of that flexibility to include more stakeholders and partners in developing more expansive visions for the education and support of students.

4. Plan, Strategize, Act, Reflect

In its work in states and districts, NUL asks every education leader, policymaker, and stakeholder to use March 2020 as a line of demarcation for analysis: What policies, practices, investments, and frames will you intentionally abandon and which do you intend to prioritize in fall 2021 and beyond?

It may seem attractive to view the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years as aberrations requiring specific responses that can be discarded as schools “return to normal” or “adapt to the new normal,” but that kind of simplicity is inherently dangerous. Instead, state leaders should ask which policies and practices can advance equity and better educational outcomes and which stand squarely in the way of state goals and vision, no matter how long-standing or how widely accepted “the way we do things” has become. What needs to be invented or refined to better support students and educators now and over time?

For example, too many schools and school systems launched remote and hybrid education with existing attendance and truancy policies in place, with little to no consideration for the changed context. On the one hand, many educators and education leaders punished students for their inability to reliably access the internet while, on the other hand, school systems were asking families and students for patience as they struggled to provide them with devices and new instructional platforms. Students were suspended or reprimanded for not turning on their cameras while they struggled to find a quiet place or avoided the discomfort of giving their classmates and teachers an intimate view of their home environments.

Educators and state leaders already suspected that seat time is not a good measure of attendance, engagement, or learning. So why would time logged in during COVID-19 be a measure of these things? How else might state leaders reshape and measure student learning, development, and engagement? Stakeholders, leaders, and policymakers should engage in a process in which they can abandon investments, policies, and practices that never served students well and bring forward those that build an excellent, equitable education.
5. Foster and Support an Education Ecosystem

NUL advocates for collaborations and partnerships built around a definition of education that values teaching, learning, and development wherever and whenever they take place. This definition thus does not limit thinking about education as solely what a school or district can accomplish. A school is but one setting, albeit a critical one. As a part of NUL’s Equity and Excellence Project, partners in its Readiness Projects ask not just what teachers or schools can accomplish but what an education ecosystem can accomplish.

Schools do not have communities; communities have schools. By that, NUL means that schools are but one of the educational and developmental spaces that allow a community to function well. Such an understanding might, for example, propel a state board to call for each district to create an opportunity map that shows where students spend their time outside of schools. Besides time at home, what investments in learning and development do students and families make when they are not in schools? Who does each school district consider as partners? How has each community knit together pathways of opportunity for young people via local children’s cabinets or out-of-schooltime intermediaries?

Ecosystems require the ongoing presence and meaningful collaboration of a range of stakeholders, educators, and practitioners in order to provide an equitable and excellent education. It also requires a rich understanding of all of those who contribute to student thriving and well-being. Including students, families, educators, policymakers, advocates, child- and youth-serving agencies, faith leaders, public health, business and industry, and higher education builds agency, voice, and connectedness to education.

6. Intentionally Build Forward Together

At the National Urban League and the Urban League Movement, we believe our impact on educational equity and excellence can be fully realized if we all take the time to engage students, families, community leaders, and education stakeholders in a meaningful, sustained manner that forces us all to be thoughtful about how children and youth learn and to attend to their learning and development holistically.

NUL partners such as the School Superintendent’s Association (AASA) have developed design principles that speak specifically to what might be possible if we build toward equity, excellence, collaboration, and a more expansive ecosystem.

NUL’s intention is to work now alongside stakeholders, policymakers, families, and young people themselves to produce better student outcomes over the next few school years. While simple promises to “partner” might inevitably result in some things being better, truly building forward together means taking serious steps to think and talk differently about goals and approaches; see and hear differently from young people, families, and front-line staff; and to act and react differently, not just at partner tables but behind closed doors when making decisions about how to allocate staff or resources.

4David Steiner and Daniel Weisberg, “When Students Go Back to School, Too Many Will Start the Year Behind. Here’s How to Catch Them Up—in Real Time,” the 74 (April 26, 2020).

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Schools are but one of the educational and developmental spaces that allow a community to function well.
Teacher Diversity and Student Success

In 2014, U.S. public school students became majority students of color for the first time, and a broad range of stakeholders have noted that the race composition of the teaching workforce is vastly mismatched. With some geographic nuance, teachers across the nation are largely White and female. This mismatch has serious implications for students of color.

Teachers should reflect the constituencies they serve, and the failure to do so can drive inequality in student outcomes. The largest segment of research to support this contention shows how same-race teachers affect end-of-year test scores in public prekindergarten, elementary, middle, and high schools. One such study uses statewide data for all of Tennessee’s public school students in the early 2010s and finds that students score significantly higher on end-of-year standardized math and reading tests when they have a same-race teacher. And it is not just Tennessee: Three studies from North Carolina by different researchers span two decades of data and find similar race-match effects in charter and traditional public schools. Similar results are found in Florida’s elementary and middle schools and Texas’s high schools.

Given the evidence of positive effects on students of having at least one teacher who shares their race or ethnicity, state boards of education, other state policymakers, and school leaders need to recognize teachers’ race and ethnicity as markers of teacher quality. Whether purposefully or not, education systems have long defined teacher quality based on what is best for White students. Asserting that diversity is a dimension of quality can disrupt practices that privilege one group of students over another and can level the playing field for teachers and students of color, who stand to benefit most from a diverse teaching force. By explicitly equating diversity with quality, state policymakers can affirm the unique benefits of racially diverse teachers and implicitly elevate diversity as an objective unto itself.

Policy conversations typically default to how states and districts can recruit more teachers of color and then retain them by making schools more welcoming. While greater workforce diversity is certainly an important policy objective in its own right, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for closing racial gaps in educational outcomes. The ultimate goal is to ensure that students of color have greater access to teachers of color and that all students experience a high-quality, diverse workforce. Increasing teacher diversity in the aggregate is a means to that end but will not guarantee universal exposures if teachers of color are found in a few schools within a given district. Teachers must be allocated across schools in a way that allows all students to see and learn from a diverse set of educators.

It is important to note that White students are largely exposed to White teachers, role models, and see themselves reflected in the curriculum. There is no evidence that exposing White students to teachers of color and other adults of color harms their achievement and achievement-related outcomes.

Teacher Pipeline

Using American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census to model the educator human capital pipeline for adults ages 25–34 as of 2015, my colleagues and I demonstrate key exit points along the teaching pipeline that constrain the number of teachers of color who end up in the classroom and stay there. Almost all routes to teacher
Teachers of color are underrepresented at all stages of the pipeline. licensure require a bachelor’s degree, yet there are not enough college graduates of color. Only 21 percent of all Black adults and 16 percent of Latino adults have a college degree in any field—a serious constraint on the number of eligible adults for teaching licensure and certification. We show the following:

- 9.1 percent of White college graduates received a teaching degree, as compared with 6.4 percent of Black college graduates, 7.1 percent of Hispanic college graduates, and 2.3 percent of Asian college graduates.
- 10.8 percent of White college graduates become teachers, as compared with 8.6 percent of Black college graduates, 9.4 percent of Hispanic college graduates, and 3.3 percent of Asian college graduates. This suggests that more diverse candidates are entering the profession through nontraditional routes.

The most recent Teacher Follow-Up Survey, a nationally representative survey administered by the U.S. Department of Education, suggests that teachers of color leave the profession at a higher rate than White teachers (8.3 versus 7.5 percent). Teachers of color also change schools at a higher rate (10.6 versus 7.5 percent), and of teachers who move, teachers of color are more likely to report their move as “involuntary.”

Additional evidence from the American Community Survey on the latter stages of the teacher human capital pipeline reveals interesting disparities in the career paths of diverse teachers. A look at teacher unemployment and attrition for those who received their teaching degree reveals differential exit and hire rates for teachers of color that may help explain why large representation gaps remain. For example, of people who have teaching degrees, teachers of color (~50 percent) report not teaching at higher rates than White teachers (~35 percent). Teachers who are not teaching may still be in education or have changed jobs. But there is also a stark disparity between unemployment rates for White teachers and for teachers of color. These gaps indicate friction in the teacher labor market. Although some “frictional” unemployment—vacancies that result from people moving to new jobs—is expected, the racial differences warrant further investigation.

Considering all these data in the context of the country’s well-documented teacher shortage areas raises questions about why teachers of color leave the profession and whether better addressing diversity in hiring and retention could alleviate shortages.

Teachers of color are underrepresented at all stages of the pipeline, and differential employment rates in an industry characterized by many job openings and mobility challenges may be exacerbating an already stark situation. In addition to seeking ways to increase the ranks of college graduates of color overall, policymakers and administrators should examine why teachers of color leave the profession and consider levers aimed at increasing equity later in the pipeline.

Reducing turnover among existing Black and Latino teachers is a critical element in diversifying the teacher workforce and thus a critical policy goal. Yet there is little research about the in-school experiences of teachers of color to explain why retention varies by teacher race and the role that job responsibilities, compensation, accountability pressures, curricular support, school environment, facilities, and resources might play in making Black and Latino teachers more likely to leave the profession. Descriptive data from national teacher surveys offer a useful starting point: When asked the reason for leaving a school or the teaching profession altogether, teachers of color point to “school factors” as the primary reason.

**Role of State and Local Policies**

Local and state policies play a critical role in determining barriers to entry into the profession and the working conditions that teachers of color face once they are in the classroom. Given the gaps in college access overall, degree and licensure requirements pose formidable barriers to potential teachers of color. Racial gaps in taking licensure and other exit/entrance exams and meeting cut scores are also major hindrances.

Without sacrificing the quality screens they represent, rethinking these requirements would open the door to many Black and Latino teacher candidates. A passing score on state licensure exams does not guarantee a teacher’s effectiveness. Many states have lowered entry requirements into teaching via provisional credentials or alternative certification routes; evidence shows little difference in teacher effectiveness across

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National Association of State Boards of Education • September 2021

18

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than exclusively relegating grading and behavior management to them, school leaders and lead teachers can purposefully assign them tasks focused on developing skills in such things as lesson preparation and leading instruction—much as student teachers receive. Paraprofessionals performing substantive classroom work can also help contravene what could otherwise be viewed as a racialized hierarchy, with predominantly White teachers and leaders supported by predominantly non-White staff and administrators.

Changing the career ladder will diversify the teacher workforce in another way. Since people of color accrue more debt while in college, they are more likely to interrupt their studies to work. These decisions lengthen the time to graduation and make completion less likely. If these students can engage in an educator apprenticeship, they can earn money and gain valuable experience during formal schooling. Better yet, states or districts can pay (or subsidize) the tuition of paraprofessionals who are completing their bachelor’s degrees because this is a better use of scarce funds than subsidizing master’s degrees, given the research on the scant impact of a master’s degree on student outcomes.

Partnering with teacher training programs will be necessary. Hence, this approach is similar in spirit to the grow-your-own programs ongoing in several states and districts, but with university partners instead tailoring offerings that are more accessible to working paraprofessionals.

**Grow-Your-Own Programs**

Adopted by many states and districts, grow-your-own and teacher residency programs aim to increase teacher diversity. Because of the growing popularity of these programs and their unique potential to bring people of color into the profession, state boards of education who have not yet done so should consider them.

As the name suggests, grow-your-own teacher programs identify potential teacher candidates, develop them, and then place them in local schools. Grow-your-own programs typically are adjacent to traditional teacher preparation programs, with districts often partnering with area universities to help candidates achieve certification. These programs engage in outreach and support that extends far beyond that of most
teacher training programs. Because they are designed to make use of the local talent pool, grow-your-own programs can target specific shortages in local labor markets (e.g., STEM or special education teachers).

Grow-your-own programs have been shown to work. For example, Project Nueva Generacion in Illinois, a partnership between a community-based organization and a traditional teacher preparation program, filled needed positions in urban and rural communities. Another example is Georgia’s extension of Future Educators of America, which identifies and supports high school students who show dispositions similar to in-service teachers.

Teacher residency programs likewise warrant serious consideration. These programs target early- and mid-career college-educated professionals who might be interested in transitioning into education. Candidates typically enter the profession through an alternative certification route and receive initial support once in the classroom. These programs have also shown success in developing and retaining diverse teachers. For example, Boston Teacher Residency graduates are more racially diverse than other Boston Public School novices, more likely to teach STEM courses, and more likely to remain in the district after five years. Other programs, like the Relay Graduate School of Education, offer formal education (typically afterschool) in conjunction with a teacher residency to provide a credential that boosts teacher salaries. More than 60 percent of its participants identify as people of color.

A key strength of both types of programs is their connection to local communities. This connection increases the chances of long-term teacher retention and having teachers who are cued into culturally relevant issues that improve their performance.

Grow-your-own programs with broader reaches into suburban and rural settings could be developed, which would increase diversity where it is needed most. For example, the Montana legislature in 2019 passed a grow-your-own grant program to develop teacher pipelines aimed at serving rural and reservation school districts.

States are clearly in the best position to develop and foster residencies and grow-your-own programs with broad geographical reaches. Because teacher residencies focus on recruiting college-educated professionals, this is the quickest approach to diversifying the workforce. Because the primary bottleneck in the teacher pipeline for individuals of color is earning a college degree, however, grow-your-own programs have more potential as a sustainable source of new teachers of color. Moreover, grow-your-own programs avoid the problem of poaching college-educated people of color from other professions that themselves suffer from a lack of diversity and representation.

The most urgent priority for increasing teacher diversity is at the start: entrance into educator preparation programs. Retention and development comes next, with the expansion of alternative routes into teaching being critical as well.  


Connection to local communities increases the chances of having teachers who are cued into culturally relevant issues that improve their performance.
The past several years have been exceptionally challenging for the nation’s five million English learners (ELs) and their families. On the heels of widespread antagonism toward immigration during the Trump administration, linguistically and culturally diverse communities experienced disproportionate effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, poverty and violence in Central America led tens of thousands of young people to seek refuge in the United States, with especially large numbers of arrivals in 2019 and 2021. Amidst all of this, schools strive to serve each child who enters their doors, in accordance with civil rights laws and to ensure a bright, economically secure future for children, their families, and their communities.

Roughly 10 percent of U.S. school children are formally identified as ELs, meaning that they require instructional supports to learn English and help them access state educational standards in English language arts, math, science, and other content areas. Beyond this common definition, however, ELs are a diverse group. While around three-quarters of ELs speak Spanish at home, many schools serve families speaking dozens of languages.

And ELs are no longer concentrated in a few states and districts. ELs make up at least 5 percent of the student population...
who continue to be identified as EL longer than the five to seven years than it typically takes students to develop academic proficiency.

During the pandemic, immigrant and linguistically diverse families have both borne the brunt of America’s job losses and are over-represented in professions that are considered essential to the country’s response and recovery. Children in these households have experienced increased economic and food insecurity, instability in their child care, and trauma. Moreover, language barriers, poor digital literacy skills among parents, inequitable access to appropriate digital devices and robust internet, and lack of digital instructional resources for ELs affected the quality of students’ home learning environments during remote learning. Predictably, ELs have experienced setbacks in their English language development, academic learning, and social and emotional health due to more than a year of interrupted learning. As the pandemic recedes, schools approach normalcy, and a historic investment of federal education dollars flows to states and school districts, state education leaders face the exceptional responsibility of

Looking only at overall EL outcomes may mask important differences between EL subpopulations. In 34 states plus Washington, DC, which is up 15 states since school year 2000–01 (figure 1). Despite their geographic dispersion, ELs are disproportionately likely to live in poverty. About 79 percent of them are served by Title I programs, compared with 51 percent of all children. Most children of immigrants—about 88 percent—were born in the United States and are thus citizens.\(^1\)

Because of the EL population’s diversity and the fact that students exit the EL subgroup once they are fluent in English, looking at EL educational outcomes can be somewhat tricky. State accountability systems consistently show gaps in academic achievement and graduation rates between ELs and their non-EL peers. However, former ELs who have exited EL services typically demonstrate comparable outcomes to their peers who were never ELs.

Furthermore, looking only at overall EL outcomes may mask important differences between EL subpopulations, including students who enter U.S. schools with limited or interrupted formal education, other newcomers to the country, and long-term ELs—that is, students who continue to be identified as EL longer than the five to seven years than it typically takes students to develop academic proficiency.

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Figure 1. Public School Students Who Are English Learners by State, 2018–19 (percent)

charting a new course for public schools and the ELs whom they serve.

**State and Federal Funding**

The federal government has passed three laws that together sent nearly $200 billion to public schools as financial relief and recovery from COVID-19. The funds were allotted based on schools’ shares of students in poverty (using Title I formulas), but all three laws mentioned the unique needs of ELs as a potential target of funds, along with a wide range of other subgroups and educational purposes. The third measure, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, went further, requiring states to reserve 5 percent and districts 20 percent of their share of funds to meet students’ academic and socio-emotional needs and to address the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on student subgroups such as ELs.

While the federal government allowed schools considerable flexibility in how they spend ARP and other COVID-19 relief dollars, states can provide technical assistance to schools on the use of funds and monitor whether schools used equitable shares of those funds on resources specifically tailored to EL needs. States can inquire, for example, whether schools implementing remote learning used funds for digital resources tailored to EL needs (such as language learning software and bilingual versions of curricular materials); outreach to immigrant families in the languages of the community; and targeted, multilingual digital support tailored to the needs of families with low digital literacy and other barriers to helping their children access remote learning. As schools transition to all in-person learning, states should encourage districts to use COVID-19 recovery funds for these purposes:

- offering afterschool and other out-of-schooltime instruction for ELs that is staffed by EL specialists and focused on ELs’ specific learning needs;
- purchasing curricular materials (including digital media) designed for ELs;
- hiring bilingual and culturally competent support staff such as guidance counselors and mental health practitioners;
- offering professional development for all staff on trauma-informed teaching and evidence-based instructional strategies for ELs; and
- improving data collection and reporting systems to provide better information on EL needs and progress.

Despite the unprecedented size of federal relief funds and the ongoing availability of federal Title III funds for ELs and immigrant students, adequate and equitable state funding is a more important priority than ever. Going into the COVID-19 crisis, many states were spending a smaller share of their gross state product on education than they did before the 2008 recession, and only a handful spent a sufficient amount in high-poverty districts to achieve national average test scores. Overall, state and district spending is a critical element of a quality education for ELs, as most ELs are integrated into mainstream classes for much of the school day. They also benefit from schoolwide resources like libraries and recreational facilities and interventions such as reducing class size and lengthening the school day or year.

In addition to attending to the overall adequacy and fairness of their funding systems, there are other steps that states can take to ensure that schools have sufficient funds to serve ELs. First, state officials may review their supplementary funding mechanisms for ELs, both to ensure a sufficient level of funding and the appropriateness of rules such as different rates for students at different English proficiency levels and for how many years a student qualifies for the extra funding. Second, ARP requires states to observe a maintenance of equity requirement, which protects high-poverty districts and schools from greater-than-average cuts in spending or staffing levels. While the maintenance of equity provision is based on school poverty levels, states and districts could apply the same principle of fairness to schools serving large numbers of ELs.

**Data for Decision Making**

Testing and accountability have been a matter of contention throughout the pandemic. Statewide testing for school accountability purposes was cancelled in 2019–20 but reinstated for 2020–21, albeit with lower stakes, as states received waivers for reaching 95 percent participation and identifying new schools for
For ELs, it is particularly important for outcome data to be contextualized with opportunity-to-learn data.

comprehensive or targeted school improvement. There is a great thirst among policymakers to understand the impact of school-building closures on student outcomes, but it remains to be seen whether the data that have been collected over the last two years can validly help them do that.

For ELs, it is particularly important for outcome data to be contextualized with opportunity-to-learn data, such as what proportion of ELs attended and were engaged in instruction (whether remote, hybrid, or in person), their access to digital resources for remote learning, and whether services such as English language development instruction were made available at the same levels during remote and socially distanced instruction as pre-pandemic. State policymakers examining assessment data should also know whether accommodations for ELs (such as the use of bilingual dictionaries or extra time) were available for tests given during the pandemic.

In addition to data from state reading, math, and science tests, state policymakers have two new indicators required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that should provide useful information about how well schools serve ELs. The first is the English language proficiency indicator, which shows the percent of ELs making annual progress toward proficiency and is included in ESSA accountability calculations. The second is the number of EL students who have not exited EL status after five years—a requirement for Title III reporting. Although the pandemic may affect the interpretations of these outcomes, comparisons across schools—taking numerous contextual aspects into account—may prove useful.

The issues that the pandemic underscored in regards to ELs have great resonance going forward. As discussed in a recent National Academy of Sciences report, policymakers should consider what equity indicators can help them better understand trends in student outcomes. For ELs, these should include the type and amount of EL-specific instruction students receive (including bilingual education, sheltered instruction in English, and English language development), whether ELs have equitable access to schoolwide programs and resources, and the ratio of ELs to EL- or bilingual-certified instructors.

Teacher Development

During the pandemic and remote learning, teachers had the unenviable responsibility for delivering high-quality instruction under conditions that were far from ideal. Many struggled to keep ELs engaged. The pandemic put into sharp focus how school systems depend on EL specialists to not only support ELs’ English language development but also their social and emotional health. They also often serve as an important touchpoint for parents of ELs, especially if they can directly communicate with them in their home language. State leaders can help ensure that districts and schools have sufficient funding to support the recruitment and retention of EL specialists and paraprofessionals, whose roles might be of even greater significance in the months and years ahead, especially as districts consider increasing learning time.

At the same time, states and school systems need to further embrace a shared system of responsibility for the education of ELs. A recent scan of state statutes and regulations found that only about half of states require course taking or professional development for general classroom teachers to support EL instruction. Now that nearly two-thirds of all teachers have at least one EL in their classroom, states should consider how to strengthen preservice training and professional learning for all teachers so they can better serve ELs. This training should include advising EL specialists, general education teachers, and other school staff on how to implement collaborative teaching practices and structures to support ELs.

Finally, since states and school districts might be inclined to use federal relief funds for curricula and instructional materials to address unfinished learning, all educators need to be well trained to identify materials and programs that are appropriate for ELs. Appropriate materials are aligned to state English language development standards, which help students develop academic language skills while deepening their understanding of content concepts. Even before the pandemic, EL specialists and general classroom teachers alike had insufficient expertise in incorporating digital learning resources into their instruction of ELs. Looking ahead, teacher training and professional learning should be deliberate in its focus on instructing ELs.
Family and Community

The pandemic exacerbated the challenges in school-family communication in many school districts. Few districts had adequate capacity to disseminate critical information regarding schooling and health and safety precautions in families’ home languages and in a timely fashion. State education agencies missed important opportunities to coordinate a systemic, equity-focused response and support district-level engagement with families. As such, many school districts found themselves experimenting with new strategies to inform and support ELs and their families.

Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee, for example, implemented a navigator system in which a broad cross-section of school staff that included teachers, cafeteria workers, and other school employees conducted regular outreach to a handful of students to identify concerns and connect them to resources as needed. The effort, while experimental, incorporates key elements that are instrumental in supporting families of ELs, including personalized outreach in parents’ home languages. As schools continue to normalize, state leaders have an opportunity to elevate and invest in promising family engagement practices, which may include investing in linguistically diverse staff and digital literacy training for parents of ELs to mitigate the homework gap.

Community-based organizations have been critical partners in supporting immigrant families throughout the pandemic, providing them with financial and food assistance, academic support, and mental health services. States should consider ways to formalize these partnerships at the state and district levels to support ELs and their families. Familiar with and trusted by immigrant communities, these organizations can reach families and communities that many schools struggle to engage.

Conclusion

In the coming years, schools will have an opportunity to build stronger, more resilient systems to support the education of ELs. Working together with practitioners, parents, and communities, state policymakers can lead the effort to ensure equitable prioritization of resources and implementation of policies that help students meet states’ rigorous learning goals.

Decoupling where students receive education from where they live is key to undoing the system’s racist roots.

Derrell Bradford

One of the earliest conversations I can remember was my mother and grandmother discussing whose address we would use so I could attend a middle school I was not zoned for. That conversation happened at a kitchen table at the corner of Baker and Woodyear Streets in southwest Baltimore, a neighborhood that would become known to many Americans years later when its burning in the wake of the death of Freddie Gray was nationally televised. Decades before I wrote an op-ed or analyzed the performance data of a school, my family was living in this neighborhood, trying to figure out how I could get the education that was right for me, just as many others do. And unknowingly, one of the most important lessons I learned there was about school choice in Baltimore—and in the country.

As an education reform advocate, I work on school choice policies the most, and it is the issue about which I feel most strongly. You might call it my first love, but it was not an amorous love. It was instead a love born of necessity.

Racial Justice through Expanded Choice
The American public education system is already a school choice system, which is navigated in four ways. Families are lucky (as I ultimately was, having received a scholarship from grades 7-12 to an independent, all-boys school just outside the city, which we never could have afforded on our own). They are rich enough to pay private school tuition, or they are able to leverage the mortgage market to get a house near the right school. They are connected and thus know the right people. Or they lie about where they live to gain entrance to a school for which they normally would not be eligible. The revelation that we already live in a choice system, but one that does not distribute the power to choose equally or fairly, turns the usual conversation about school choice—who has it and how much they should have—on its head. It is essential context for members of state boards of education and other state leaders considering choice policies in any and all of their forms.

And while it might be too much to expect state board members to set policy based on luck or social networks, those based on wealth and address should be wholly in their purview—and top of mind, given the historical context from which these policies arose. So why would a state board support or adopt school choice policies in 2021 and into the future? Here are three reasons worth considering: the effects on schooling of segregated neighborhoods, the way the pandemic has redefined choice, and the demonstrated lack of resilience of many existing school systems.

Address and Education

The debate over race relations and racial equity in America gives public education policymakers an opportunity to examine one of its most fundamental links, that of housing and schooling, and their respective roles in the delivery of public education. It would be a mistake to see such an examination as an attack on neighborhood schooling. It is instead an opportunity to ask why the place where a child lives—and indeed the value of the property and how much tax revenue can be derived from it—is the most important determinant of educational opportunity and not the fit of the school itself.

The troubling racist origins of America’s housing policy are rooted in the New Deal-era creation of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). A key plank of New Deal policy in post-Depression America was to provide loans to prospective homeowners and thus stoke wealth creation. The HOLC examined America’s neighborhoods and created a series of now infamous maps that defined where federally backed mortgages would be made available and where they would not. These maps literally color-coded America into four categories: Best (green), Still Desirable (blue), Definitely Declining (yellow), and Hazardous. The hazardous zones, denoted by the color red, birthed one of the century’s most racially divisive and corrosive economic policies, known as redlining.

This policy’s effects were twofold. First, they built upon a national agenda that segregated public housing and intensified the country’s racial divides. Indeed, these policies divided communities that had been integrated—often working-class and including new immigrants and African Americans. The result: the country’s African Americans in particular found themselves living in the “hazardous” zones, which were often ringed off by highways, train tracks, and power plants.

Second, the FHA, through its widely propagated underwriting policies, created the conditions by which African Americans living in these zones were systematically denied mortgages to improve their own housing or to move to a more “desirable” zone and thus to build wealth as their White counterparts were doing, through amortized mortgages at favorable rates of interest.

In his seminal book The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America, Richard Rothstein noted an example: how a local HOLC appraiser color-coded the middle-class St. Louis suburb of Ladue green because it had “not a single foreigner or negro.” The similarly middle-class, suburban Lincoln Terrace was colored red because it had “little or no value today... due to the colored element now controlling the district.” While Rothstein notes some exceptions, he rightly identifies how this process did a great deal to label African American homeowners as poor risks, which had a pronounced and chilling effect.

Further, the FHA, which insured bank mortgages with amortized, 20-year terms, included an explicit Whites-only standard in
An environment that assigns students to schools based on where they live is an environment based not on abundance but on scarcity.

its appraisal policies, thus making segregation the official policy of the federal government. Its 1935 Underwriters Manual declared, “If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally leads to instability and a reduction in values.” As Emory Law Professor Dorothy Brown asserts, the nation’s housing markets still penalize Black homeowners—through reduced home appreciation—in neighborhoods that are more than 10 percent African American.3

Giving Families What They Want

An environment that assigns students to schools based on where they live is an environment based not on abundance but on scarcity. In this environment, excellent or right-fit schools are a fixed or rationed quantity, and competition for them is always zero sum. U.S. public school governance exacerbates the issue, as it is in some ways held hostage by this emphasis on place and the congruence of municipal and neighborhood boundaries to schools perceived as “desirable.”

Again, it does not have to be this way. And if a year and a half of disrupted schooling across the country has done anything positive, it has been to give policymakers a broader notion of what choice is and how to assemble, finance, and support ways for learning to happen without regard to a child’s home address.

Boards have many opportunities to expand choice. Boards should encourage the tremendous infusion of resources from the American Rescue Plan to build on efforts made to roll out a large-scale “summer of choice” in 2022 where community groups, museums, camps, sports, and enrichment programs are all engaged to reorient millions of students who spent the 2020–21 school year tethered to computer screens. Boards could jumpstart this effort by using scheduled breaks in the school calendar as well. Much learning happens outside the classroom and school day. Now is a great time to turn this axiom into a foundational element of public education.

Boards should consider a permanent virtual option for learning. Whether it is because trust has not been fully restored between families and school districts that denied them an in-person
option at first for epidemiological reasons, but later clearly for political ones, families deserve to be able to choose a virtual option if that works for them. More specifically, state boards could adopt a “district in the cloud” approach that allows families to match with a wide array of school districts, charter networks, independent schools, and specialist educators to both remediate and accelerate learning for students.

Boards should embrace pods and hybrid homeschooling arrangements as a feature of future education landscapes. Small-group learning, where relationships and trust are built, is essential, whether in a school building or in a living room. These options can be implemented with an emphasis on equity to profound effect. Homeschoolers may need a lab or a sports team, and schools may need the head count and better community engagement. An openness to these arrangements and choices will make the landscape richer for all students. Families could be funded directly to engage with a professional tutor of their choice as well.

The problem of scarcity cannot be solved by limiting the creation of things families want. The paradigm of address and assignment automatically pits those with less desirable options against those with more—a political fight the former has not been able to win. It would be better to focus on opening access to preexisting schools of all types—open enrolled public schools, charters, magnet, and independent schools—so that districts replicate schools that show heightened demand and design unique learning environments alongside parents instead. This “choice” environment will give policymakers, educators, and families more levers to pull to create a more dynamic, changeable, responsive system of schooling for everyone.

**Single School System as a Liability**

The pandemic and resultant school closures quite possibly constitute the single biggest disruption to a public institution in a century. While fights simmer over whether we should use the term learning loss to describe what has happened to students, a greater revelation occurred. Many school systems—large urban districts in particular—were not up to this challenge. There was no one break in the armor. Instead, myriad cracks—from labor agreements to political vulnerabilities to chaotic, unsustainable school finance arrangements—turned to deep fissures all at once. The façade crumbled.

In a centrally run and uniformly governed monosystem, there would have been few if any examples to point to for parents who were desperate for an in-person option. But parochial schools in New York and Philadelphia, for instance, were able to manage mask-wearing regimens while delivering in-person instruction. In a monosystem that deployed virtual learning poorly, there would have been no excellent programs of online instruction or statewide virtual tutoring initiatives, like in Rhode Island, to show what was possible. In a monosystem of public schools where teachers are sourced from one union and trained almost exclusively by schools of education, there would be no philanthropic tutoring efforts, like in Tennessee, to help students recover.

A uniformly governed, single method of delivering education might seem rational on paper, but it confounds our pluralist roots as a nation of diverse people and leaves us dangerously ill equipped to deal with large shocks, be they epidemiological, political, or educational. I urge state board members to glean from this last year and a half that a uniform system is uniformly vulnerable and to see “choice” as the power to create new schools, fund unique modes and matching of learning, or expand access to schools of all types. In this way, they can build a more resilient, desirable educational enterprise that better equips students and families to find the education that works best for them.

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5Paymon Rouhanifard, “Blue States Are Failing Their

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I urge state board members to glean from this last year and a half that a uniform system is uniformly vulnerable.
Supporting Youth with the Most Need

Long before the pandemic, an estimated five million young people were experiencing disruptions to their education through experiences like a placement in foster care, an experience with homelessness, or incarceration. Many saw multiple disruptions simultaneously. Despite these students’ different circumstances, the root causes of their educational challenges are consistent: interrupted learning, barriers to enrollment, and disconnected care. The impact is also the same: inconsistent, disjointed learning experiences. As a result, they are more likely to achieve far below grade level, be excluded from postsecondary opportunities, drop out of high school, become early parents, be employed in low-wage and insecure jobs, grow increasingly reliant on the social safety net over time, and enter (or return to) the criminal justice system.

Some of these student experiences—an eviction or a parent’s mental health crisis—are not closely tracked. Others—foster care placement or expulsion from school—are rigorously quantified, aggregated, disaggregated, tracked, and reported. For example, we know that statistically, 54 percent of youth in foster care do not graduate from high school, 97 percent do not graduate from college, they are more likely to experience homelessness and incarceration as adults, are more likely to be under- and unemployed, and are more likely to rely on public benefits as a result. In addition, nearly all young people who experience one type of disruption also experience another, often in quick succession or even simultaneously. Where data sets exist for some experiences, others go uncounted, and there is no deduplicated data set that accounts for young people who have more than one disruptive experience. The lack of reliable data makes identifying and tracking these student populations difficult.

Moreover, there are four important population overlays to be mindful of: race and ethnicity, disability, gender, and English proficiency. To be clear, these attributes are not themselves problems. However, the ways in which systems discriminate against people along these lines of difference creates disparities in both opportunities and outcomes. The populations of young people who experience disruptive experiences are disproportionately Black, brown, and Native. Many more have disabilities and unmet special education needs. All young people, regardless of their sexuality and gender identity, experience the harms of patriarchal attitudes and fixed concepts of gender roles. And students who are learning English as a new language face additional barriers to accessing the services and programs that they might need.

Each of these experiences is either created or exacerbated by material poverty. While cash cannot remove all disruption from a young person’s life, it can certainly mitigate the effects of otherwise stressful, confusing, or frightening experiences.

The compounding nature of adversity results in a small number of young people who experience enormous, nearly insurmountable obstacles to success—no matter how it is defined. They are likely to have the most serious, most complex needs, and the measure of real, meaningful equity in a system is whether those students’ needs are met. Right now, the systems that these young people turn to, or are sent to, are punitive in nature and far more likely to punish than to support. In addition to the specific needs that a young person might have because of their unique circumstances, they have an invisible additional burden of navigating supports across fragmented systems.

Overcoming Fragmentation

Systemic fragmentation is not a new phenomenon. Many communities offer programs and services tailored to...
COVID-19 as Added Disruptor

While COVID-19 left virtually no student in America unaffected, the disruption for some was far more severe. Not only were learning experiences delayed, interrupted, or unfinished, but as many as three million K-12 students encountered fundamental barriers to attending school regularly at all.¹¹ Students’ pathways to college were also meaningfully disrupted.

Some went missing from classrooms—meaning that they are interested and likely to return to school as soon as they can but have missed significant portions of the instructional time that their peers received. Although many students had intermittent challenges with distance learning, students living in group homes or shelters and those changing foster care placements felt this change much more acutely. Similarly, students who needed additional support to access learning—including young people with IEPs who were attending school from adult prisons or unaccompanied and new-arrival immigrant students who may not have legal status and were learning English as a new language—found themselves thwarted by a lack of special education and language supports, despite their desire to be engaged in school.

For others, their transition away from education may be permanent. Many of these are older students who left high school or college pathways to take on new or additional work responsibilities because of pressing economic needs for themselves and their families. These students’ circumstances have likely changed in ways that make returning to school feel like an impossible dream; they may now be primary wage earners for their families or have children themselves.

State and local education systems are more frayed and fragile than ever, and the temptation to revert to how things were before the pandemic will be strong. It is critical that community, education, and policy leaders at all levels resist the pull to return to an approach to their work that focuses on programs, funding streams, and eligibility categories. Instead, state leaders should begin by asking who is missing and why—and then work to design solutions that meet real needs for their communities.
Principles for Coherence

Systems change does not happen overnight. However, four key principles for designing coherent systems that meet the needs of students whose education has been disrupted shift mind-sets and chart a course of action. State boards of education can apply these principles and so can anyone responsible for day-to-day decisions of case management on up to big, strategic choices. The more consistently and broadly these principles are used, the greater the impact will be.

**Continuity of people** prioritizes adding the smallest number of new adults to a young person’s life and then maintains those relationships over the longest possible period. For many students, it is not the case that they fall through the cracks and are served by no one; they are served by everyone and receive too little from too many. State boards should consider ways to incentivize both school staffing plans and partnerships with community-based organizations that prioritize and reward the cultivation and sustaining of adult-child relationships over time.

**Continuity of information** gives adults in a young person’s life access to the right information at the right time to support good decision making. Access to accurate, real-time data in order to help students navigate multiple systems that may be giving them conflicting guidance or setting competing expectations is essential. State boards could promote investment in infrastructure upgrades to improve quality, detail, and rigor in data collection, with a focus on student populations furthest from opportunity who may be served by multiple public agencies simultaneously.

**Someone owns the management of collaboration and coordination while prioritizing coherence.** It is a full-time job and cannot be relegated to those who administer stand-alone programs or agencies. State boards could develop guidelines for schools on resourcing and recruitment strategies for positions like this and could consider developing a cohort approach to these roles across school districts to enable individuals to share best practices. At the state level, findings from these cohorts’ work could be shared with other states—and the field more broadly.

**Student voice** requires leaders across agencies and hierarchies to listen responsively and creatively to the students who are experiencing problems and marshal resources to meet those needs. State boards—including student members of those boards—classroom teachers, and everyone in between can engage in active listening. Such reimagined leadership does not just cultivate feelings of empowerment among students but actually enables leaders to make important decisions. If not in place, state boards should advocate for selection of student members to amplify their perspective. If they already have student members, boards should ensure that they center existing student members’ voice in formal proceedings, including by giving them full voting power.

The Cost of “Back to Normal”

Fragmented systems cause stress, unhappiness, fear, corrosion of relationships, and destabilization of communities. They are also tremendously expensive. Bellwether Education Partners’ financial modeling estimates that a system with effective first-intervention strategies for students who experience disruptions return $600,000 per person over their lifetime to communities. Under the pricey status quo, jail cells, lost wages, lost tax revenue from under- and unemployment, and stress on the limited social safety net are pure costs—not investments. As one input to the model, we calculated the costs of supporting youth in foster care under present systems who, as previously noted, are statistically more likely to be under- and unemployed and rely on public benefits as a result of a range of experiences. The same analysis for youth incarceration, homelessness, and pregnancy accounted for the duplications across populations and found that the total current direct and indirect cost of the status quo is $1.7 trillion. In a more coherent system, services that work would cost an estimated $204 billion. The $1.5 trillion (over the lifetime of the people currently being served by key social service agencies) could be redirected toward improved services and greater investment in overall community well-being (figure 1). Bellwether terms it the value of harms avoided.

There is reason for optimism if states and school districts use American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act funds thoughtfully. With a historic $123 billion for K-12 and $39 billion for higher education, ARP funds can exponentially increase...
ARP funds provide an enormous opportunity to build systems that are more resilient and more coherent.

The pandemic has laid bare many of the long-standing, complex needs like homelessness, food insecurity, and workforce development. “Back to normal” cannot be the goal. ARP funds provide an enormous opportunity to build systems that are more resilient and more coherent. It is an opportunity that should not be squandered.

States should seize this moment by activating reimagined approaches to leadership, partnering with people closest to the problems, focusing on providing guidance and resources, and setting expectations for public agencies, contractors, and local partners through strong planning and support for implementation. State leaders can accomplish these aims in three key ways:

As a general rule, people who are experiencing unmet needs should be approached as partners in leadership early and deeply, as they are best positioned to help to define and solve the problems. Where that work is best done locally because of geographic or demographic variation, states should consult with, and provide guidance for, strong community partnerships as they continue to refine their allocations of federal ARP funds, in keeping with the law’s mandates.

With the foundation of partnership established, state leaders should create opportunities for unified spending plans that span a range of public services and avoid fragmentation. States can allow blended funding to meet complex needs, avoiding rigid eligibility criteria and considering every possible opportunity to use available funding for direct-cash transfers. States should also encourage increased investments in startup costs for the kinds of durable supports that were already long overdue, including data infrastructure for real-time sharing of student records, on-campus laundromats, and food banks for students experiencing unmet basic needs. In addition, investments in hotlines, clearinghouses, and case management infrastructure to provide needed 1:1 services for students and families who currently carry the burden of navigating across fragmented systems on their own are critical.

Finally, accountability is key. States should set clear expectations for local public agencies and partner organizations that are contracting to deliver services by establishing strong evaluation criteria at the outset and ensuring that strategies for continuous improvement are in place. Mechanisms of accountability will allow states to exercise meaningful oversight and quickly identify best practices to replicate, share, and scale.

Reimagining Student Support

The pandemic has laid bare many of the long-standing inequities in the lives of far too many...
students. For young people in need of the coherent support that our systems are not designed to provide, the scope and complexity of challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 are profound. The status quo approach of one-time fragmented supports, parcelled out by state officials operating in silos, not only will not meet the needs of students who experience disruptions to their education but often make the work of getting their needs met harder.

Instead, state officials should make coordination and collaboration a key element of their work, even if that has not historically been the way that things are done. This effort starts with proactively communicating across agency boundaries, sharing plans, asking for input, convening cross-agency partnerships, and being open to compromise. For example, as states are planning to disperse education dollars to districts, counties are making plans for discretionary recovery funds that will be allocated to the social service agencies likely to be serving the very same students. If leaders work together and share information about their highest-need student populations, the service gaps that might exist, and best practices around delivering services in a coherent way, they can magnify their spending impact.

State leaders should also prioritize seeking expert advice from people who are experiencing these unmet needs and weigh those perspectives with the same seriousness as all other expert counsel. That might mean asking a student board member to share an example of a time when an adult did not have the information that they needed to provide good support. It could also mean inviting advocacy groups comprising young people who have had disrupted education pathways, such as youth who were or are incarcerated or who have experienced homelessness, to propose solutions they believe would have worked for them.

The measure of real, meaningful equity in a system is whether and how the most complex, difficult, and challenging needs are met. Right now, most of the systems that these young people turn to (or are sent to), do not meet needs; they punish failure. ARP funds are a once-in-a-lifetime chance to create more resilient systems that can effectively support students who experience disruptions through a new focus on coherence. This reimagined approach will give states an opportunity to do exactly what thoughtful stewards of public funds ought to be doing: use limited resources to meaningfully improve students’ lives.


10“Rigged” is a choose-your-own-adventure style game designed and developed by Bellwether Education Partners to help leaders in education and social service agencies walk in the shoes of the students they serve. See https://thegameisrigged.org/.


13Robson, Korman, and Daulton, “The Value of Harms Avoided.”
Over the last few years, Texas, Connecticut, and California have led the way in approving courses in ethnic studies to provide high school students with engaging, culturally relevant instruction. Texas blazed the trail in 2018 when its state board of education approved an elective course in Mexican American studies. Then in April 2020, the board unanimously approved an African American studies course.

With legislation signed by Gov. Ned Lamont in June 2019, Connecticut became the first state to require all public high schools to offer an elective course in African American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino studies. The state board unanimously accepted the curriculum in December 2020.

In March, the California State Board of Education approved an ethnic studies model curriculum for school districts considering development of an ethnic studies elective. Intended as a resource, the model offers sample lessons and provides guidance on working within the community to ensure stakeholder input and guidance on teaching a sensitive subject. Certified teachers will teach the elective courses.

All three states are providing professional development opportunities for those who will teach the courses. For instance, California’s education budget for 2021–22 includes $55 million for ethnic studies resources for schools and professional development for educators teaching ethnic studies.

In a year marked by contentious conversations in many states about broadening standards for teaching American history to incorporate more Black and Latino history, the push by these three states to create ethnic studies courses stands out. “I view this course as complementary to our regular history offerings,” said Gladys Labas, director of equity and language at the Connecticut State Department of Education. “I believe the course needs to stand alone in order to address all the important, enduring concepts that our students need to learn. In our training, we are encouraging teachers to take an interdisciplinary approach even though the course sits in the social studies department. For example, an English teacher may be invited to guide students in reading and discussing relevant literature.”

Texas

“Texas is an example of what education officials can accomplish when they cast aside politics as usual,” said Texas state board member Georgina Pérez. The board made national headlines in 2018 when it became the first state to offer students stand-alone courses in Mexican American studies.

Just a few years earlier, such an outcome would have seemed fantastical. In Texas, Hispanic and African American students account for roughly two-thirds of the total student population. Yet students, educators, and advocates had spent years trying unsuccessfully to convince the state board to create a state-wide course highlighting the contributions of Mexican Americans and African Americans, which proponents argued are often underrepresented in standard social studies courses.

“The conversation always devolved into identity politics, and we were getting nowhere,” Pérez recalled. Sensing the need for a new approach, Pérez pointed her colleagues to research on the effects of exposure to ethnic studies.
courses on dropout and graduation rates, both of which were important metrics under the state’s school accountability system. The studies revealed not only improvements in attendance and graduation but also reduced disciplinary issues and increased college matriculation, a key component of an initiative supported by the state’s business community to improve postsecondary readiness.

Advisory teams of Texas educators and other stakeholders developed the standards for the African American studies course as well. Based on a course that the Dallas Independent School District already offered, the course is a comprehensive survey of African American politics, culture, and history, beginning with precolonial African civilizations and ending in the modern era.

“I think students look for themselves in what they study,” said Texas Board Chair Keven Ellis. “When our students see themselves in what they’re learning, they’re an engaged student, and when you have an engaged student, that’s when you see increased student success.”

“This course exceeded anything I ever thought it would,” said state board member Aicha Davis. “It’s so rich, and it’s something I wish I could have taken when I was young. Kids for generations will become better people because of this course. And I know other states are going to pick up on it.”

“It’s a hell of a lot easier to retreat to our political corners and focus on scoring points with our base, but all that gets us is the same old crap,” Pérez said. “We have to be the radical middle, and that means breaking bread with people who may not understand us and figuring out what we have in common.”

Texas is also considering courses in Native American studies, Latino studies, and Asian and Pacific Islander studies.

Connecticut

A grassroots effort promoted adoption of ethnic studies in Connecticut, where students of color constitute nearly half of public school enrollment, and the General Assembly’s African American and Latino Caucus backed the plan. The Education Committee conducted hearings, at which students, parents, and educators urged lawmakers to authorize African American and Latino studies for the state’s high schools.

“Growing up Black, I rarely felt that my history was discussed in school, save during the month of February,” one student said at a legislative hearing. “Even then, we were taught a sugar-coated version of this history centered around a smooth transition from a violent, racist society to a peaceful, equitable one that we were supposedly living in.”

Said another at the hearing, “As an African American male, I tend to feel isolated in the classroom due to the fact that the U.S. history curriculum focuses on white exceptionalism and Black inferiority.”

After legislative approval, the state’s department of education developed the two-semester course in partnership with a quasi-public agency, the State Education Resource Center. Guidance came from a 150-member advisory group comprising K-12 educators, college professors and scholars, national researchers and historians, representatives of education and community organizations, students, and parents. The curriculum focuses on a two-pronged, inquiry-based approach, including content knowledge and student identity development. It incorporates themes from the state’s social studies framework.

In his announcement of Connecticut’s course in African American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino studies, Governor Lamont said, “Increasing the diversity of what we teach is critical to providing students with a better understanding of who we are as a society. Adding this course in our high schools will be an enormous benefit not only to our Black and Latino students, but also to students of all backgrounds because everyone can benefit from these studies.”

This year, the Connecticut General Assembly passed, as part of its budget implementer bill, a requirement for the state’s education department to develop a model K-8 curriculum that includes Native American studies; Asian American and Pacific Islander studies; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual orientations and gender identities studies; climate change; personal financial management and financial literacy; and military service and the experience of American veterans.
California

In California, where three out of four public school students are students of color, the legislature in 2016 mandated development of an ethnic studies model curriculum to serve as a guide for school districts interested in developing an elective course.

The development process began with a committee writing the first draft, which was reviewed by the state’s Instructional Quality Commission and posted for public comment in May 2019. Stakeholders weighed in on the draft, sending thousands of emails. Many expressed concerns that the curriculum lacked a balance of perspectives and did not reflect the full spectrum of California’s diversity. The state then extended the process to allow time for thoughtful revision, which involved consultation with ethnic studies experts and others.

When the curriculum came to the state board for a vote in March, it marked the culmination of four years of work to develop ethnic studies guidance aligned with California’s history and social science standards and curriculum frameworks, state board guidelines, and state law. Those testifying in favor of the model curriculum included civil rights icons Dolores Huerta, Karen Korematsu, and Temple University Professor Molefi Kete Asante, among others.

In California, ethnic studies can be either a semester- or year-long elective or can be embedded within another course. It may not always be part of the social studies curriculum. For example, an English course could include ethnic studies.

California’s model curriculum is aimed at illuminating the struggles and contributions of Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans in California. While not mandated, the curriculum is intended to give local school districts the background, ideas, and examples to begin local discussions on expanding ethnic studies offerings.

Many school districts in California already had ethnic studies courses. Others have developed and adopted ethnic studies courses guided by the model curriculum. Still others have integrated ethnic studies material into existing social studies, English, or other courses.

“This day has been a long time in coming, and we are reminded daily that the racial injustice it reveals is not only a legacy of the past but also a clear and present danger.”

“Coursework in ethnic studies provides the opportunity for all students, regardless of ethnicity, to value diversity and become leaders in our global society.”

Illinois

Gov. J.B. Pritzker of Illinois signed the Teaching Equitable Asian American History Act into law in July, making Illinois the first state to require that a unit of Asian American history be taught in public schools. The measure is intended to ensure that every high school graduate in the state learns about the history, contributions, and traditions of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

Advocacy of students and parents has been key to the authorization of ethnic studies courses. State board members expressed hope that students of all ethnicities will enroll in these classes in the fall.

When current social studies standards in the District of Columbia were last revised in 2006, President Barack Obama had not yet been elected as the first African American president of the United States, the landmark Supreme Court case Obergefell v. Hodges had not been decided, and Black Lives Matter protests and anti-Asian rhetoric and attacks had not begun to press American society to confront what it means to be antiracist. Despite the strengths of DC’s existing standards—their clarity and breadth—a revision was long overdue.

In 2019, the DC State Board of Education began to explore how it would review and revise its preK-12 social studies standards. Its elected members asked several questions: How often should state standards be reviewed and updated? How have states designed standards review processes that best engaged key and marginalized stakeholders and the public? How does a state embark on a standards review process in the absence of codified practices in state statute?

The board saw this process as an opportunity for DC to be progressive and bold. It affirmed its priorities and direction by stating at the outset of the process that the revised social studies standards would be “culturally inclusive and antiracist, impart important social studies content in the early grades, strengthen student knowledge of democratic principles and values, and promote civic engagement.” At the same time, members knew the task ahead would not be easy.

District of Columbia Embeds Antiracist Lens in Update of Social Studies Standards

Jessica Sutter and Alexander Jue
Past Standards Revision Processes

DC is a unique “state” in many regards. First, it only established a state education agency, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), in 2007 as part of the Public Education Reform Amendment Act. When OSSE was established, DC was home to just over 71,000 public school students in DC Public Schools and 15 public charter schools. Today, there are nearly 95,000 public school students across 68 local education agencies (LEAs)—each with the flexibility to develop and implement its own curriculum. Consequently, there are no statewide textbooks or curriculum tools that are used across all of the public schools in DC, and there is no clarity around requirements for all LEAs to select curriculum that meets the standards that the state board adopts.

Over the last 10 years, DC has seen some changes to its statewide standards. For instance, in 2010, DC was awarded $75 million in federal Race to the Top funds and adopted the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts as a condition of the award. In December 2013, DC adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, and in April 2016, the state board and OSSE adapted and then voted to adopt the Young Women’s Project Health Education Standards. The state board has since adopted physical education standards. Yet DC has not written learning standards from scratch, and there is no guidance in state statute about how standards should be reviewed or how often they should be reconsidered.

Beginning a New Process

In the absence of codified guidance on how state standards of learning should be updated, the state board in July 2019 began a multiyear work plan under the leadership of Ward 6 Representative Jessica Sutter, a former middle school social studies teacher. The plan to update and revise the social studies standards included extensive collaboration with OSSE and the convening and engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders. The goal is to revise social studies standards for implementation at the beginning of the 2022–23 school year, and the work is ongoing (table 1). The state board hopes these revised standards will be implemented in all LEAs across DC.

The initial work plan and discussions predated the Black Lives Matter protests that peaked in the summer of 2020 after the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others. In 2019 and into early 2020, the state board convened a Social Studies Standards Committee to discuss the process by which it would update the standards and how key and marginalized stakeholders and the public would be engaged. Because many citizens in the nation’s capital and around the world were discussing what it means to be antiracist, Black Lives Matter served to amplify the importance of this standards revision work.

The committee’s first step in July 2020 was to convene a diverse, representative Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee (SSSAC) and to set a timeline for the state board to collaborate with OSSE and its Technical Writing Committee on moving toward final standards. The SSSAC was charged with drafting guiding principles and making recommendations to the state board and OSSE on how the state standards should be revised and updated to reflect the needs of DC students and teachers.

Unlike most other states, DC does not have locally elected school boards with direct oversight of local school policies and personnel. The state board serves as the only directly elected body responsible for public education in DC. Thus it was important for the state board to ensure that a diverse set of community voices, engagement, and participation was forefront in the revisions process. That meant seeking a membership that was diverse in many ways: by wards of residence and work, race, ethnicity, and gender, as well identity: parents, preK-12 teachers, school leaders, students, and curriculum and content experts. By the end of the open application process, the state board had received over 100 applications for its 26-member advisory committee. The state board conducted a deidentified review of applicants, ranking applicants based on responses, and then checked to ensure that the selected committee was representative based on the demographic diversity factors listed above.

The SSSAC conducted community stakeholder outreach, providing two opportunities for feedback. The first was a three-question survey that asked the public to rate its satisfaction with the current social studies standards and provide thoughts on what students should know by the
Most survey respondents were moderately dissatisfied with DC social studies classes and learning.

time they graduate from a public school in DC. The three-question survey was open for a three-week period in the fall 2020 and received nearly 270 responses from residents with children in DC Public Schools, public charter schools, and private and parochial schools, as well as individuals without children in DC schools.

To ensure equity of access, flyers with QR codes were posted at school meal distribution sites and community locations, and the electronic survey link was widely distributed via email, social media, and various community contacts (i.e., Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, Ward Education Councils, DC Public School and public charter school leadership teams). Most survey respondents shared that they were moderately dissatisfied with DC social studies classes and learning.

The second opportunity for community stakeholder outreach was when the SSSAC asked for public comment after the guiding principles were drafted. A 10-day public comment period was open at the end of November 2020. Sixty people—representing teachers, parents, students,
Drafting and Framing Guiding Principles

The SSSAC defined a “guiding principle” as a statement that would provide OSSE and their Technical Writing Committee with information on how to revise and rewrite the existing standards. Each statement is intended be clear and actionable for standards writers. Because the SSSAC knew it would ultimately generate a long list of guiding principles, it decided to narrow down the list, through internal discussions and with public input, to 15 to 20 principles for eventual state board adoption.

Beginning in July 2020, the SSSAC met monthly for two-hour sessions in which members discussed the current standards, the interests of the state board, and the SSSAC’s own hopes for updated standards. Over six months, during public meetings and via individual worksheets and surveys, SSSAC members brainstormed and crafted a draft list of Guiding Principles. Members had the chance to vote individual principles up or down, and the SSSAC engaged in facilitated discussion to arrive at consensus on the final Guiding Principles presented to the board for adoption.

In December 2020, the SSSAC delivered a final list of 19 guiding principles to the state board, which adopted them during its December meeting. The principles are categorized into four groups: (1) structure and content, (2) knowledge and skills, (3) diversity and inclusion, and (4) instruction flexibility and equity. Below are key themes from the guiding principles:

- fewer, higher, clearer, rigorous standards that will be coherent, developmentally appropriate, and vertically aligned across preK-12;
- expansion of the types of skills and knowledge to which all DC students should be guaranteed access (e.g., digital literacy, student agency, active participation in a democratic society, analysis of power, and bias in history); and
- recognition that the world in which DC students are growing up is—more than ever before—globally interconnected and culturally and racially diverse.

Building on the state board’s call for antiracist and culturally inclusive standards, the preamble of the guiding principles implores the authors of the new standards to move beyond a “heroes and holidays” treatment of history content and states that “no District student should graduate without authentic interracial, intercultural, international exchange and experience.”

In DC, 64 percent of students identify as African American/Black (non-Hispanic), and 20 percent of students identify as Hispanic or Latinx. In addition, OSSE has designated 47 percent of public school students as at risk, and 12 percent of students receive English learner services. Because educational policymakers tend to be removed from the students directly affected by their work, the SSSAC also recommended that OSSE seek standards writers who would reflect the demographics and experiences of DC students and communities (e.g., LGBTQ+ writers, advocates for people with disabilities, and Black and Indigenous people of color, or BIPOC).

The SSSAC also recommended that the writers encourage teaching Black history through the words of Black people and giving agency to BIPOC rather than discussing history only in relation to white people. One member of the SSSAC, Lamar Bethea, a teacher at Statesman College Preparatory Academy for Boys, shared his perspective on this: “If history is only taught through a Eurocentric lens, every other race becomes ‘other.’ Eurocentric ideals become the default view of teaching the material, so authentic teaching of BIPOC becomes...
more of an offshoot or elective/alternative history. We need to make the shift into giving BIPOC agency in history lessons because it can help remove the feeling of ‘otherness.’” Another committee member, Jessica Rucker, a teacher at E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, reflected: “In my courses, US History no longer simply means ‘United States History.' It means ‘US’ history: us and our stories. In this way, students’ voices and words and the words of the broader BIPOC community, is the curriculum.”

From Principles to Standards

The Technical Writing Committee began work in February 2021. It comprises preK-12 social studies educators from DC Public Schools and public charter schools, as well as local and national technical experts. Five members of the SSSAC are also on the writing committee, providing continuity between the state board and OSSE working groups.

The work of the writing committee is grounded in the guiding principles. As part of the collaborative process, the writing committee is providing the SSSAC several outlines and drafts for feedback during the writing year. The SSSAC conducted its first review of the writing committee’s work in April 2021. They considered content strands, cross-cutting concepts, core ideas, and skills. Additional opportunities for feedback from the SSSAC occurred in June 2021, focused on the structure of the standards and brief course descriptions by grade, and in mid-August 2021, when the SSSAC reviewed a full draft of the revised standards.

This fall, OSSE hopes to present a revised draft of standards to the state board. The board will then seek public feedback on the draft during winter 2021 and schedule a vote to adopt the new standards next spring.

Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Next Steps

To date, and through this multiyear process, the state board managed a number of challenges:

- balancing the relative weight of priorities of the elected state board and its members (i.e., democratic principles) versus the priorities raised by a community advisory panel (i.e., SSSAC);
- managing decisions about whether to adopt or incorporate existing social studies and civics frameworks such as the National Council of the Social Studies “College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework” versus creating something unique to DC; and
- creating and ensuring that a first effort at a statewide, community advisory panel is diverse, representative, and promotes equitable participation.

The state board learned a few key lessons as well, which will be applicable to future state standards work in DC and could be considered by other state boards embarking on this type of work:

- **Plan ahead.** Have an idea of the work you want to accomplish—with a rough timeline and milestones (mutually negotiated with partners)—before the process begins. There will likely be continuous improvement, collaboration, and partnership as the work gets started, but without an initial set of guardrails and foundation, the work may never feel truly grounded in purpose.
- **Build a team.** Have a core group of dedicated staff, partners, and community members to ensure that the work moves forward. Designating a series of point persons and co-chairs to help define meeting agendas and goals is key.
- **Less is more.** Honor timelines and deadlines that you have set for yourself, and know when you may need to close or end a particular part of the process so that the work stays grounded and moves forward. It is okay to leave some unanswered questions on the table, and it may be necessary to cut back or limit items for inclusion in, for example, the guiding principles drafted by the SSSAC.

DC’s state board has designed and coordinated a collaborative process to revise social studies standards that will ideally facilitate learning the long, interconnected arcs of history, economics, politics, and geography that run through the American past, helping students make connections between history and the present, where they are active agents of civic change. While the new standards will not be implemented until the 2022–23 school year, the state board has planned these revisions with a rapidly changing world in mind and prioritized the critical examination of history as an essential skill for all DC students.

2Previously, state-level functions related to education were carried out by the central office of DC's largest local education agency, DC Public Schools.


4Experts included Dr. Danielle Allen, director of Democratic Knowledge Project at Harvard University; Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, historian and producer of the Southern Poverty Law Center podcast "Teaching Hard History"; Dr. Karen Thomas-Brown, member of C3 Framework Writing Committee; Natalie Wexler, author of The Knowledge Gap; Dr. Bernard Demczuk, historian at Ben's Chili Bowl Foundation; Jennifer Manise, executive director of The Longview Foundation for World Affairs and International Understanding; and Christopher Riano, executive director of the Center for Civic Education.

5Historian David Blight describes hard history as dealing with the "hard questions of our past—slavery, exploitation, violence, dispossession, discrimination and the work that has been done to overcome or thwart those realities." "Teaching Hard History" (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018), p. 7.


7"DC does not use the free and reduced-priced lunch designation. Instead, DC designates particular students at risk: those who qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, have been identified as homeless during the academic year, are under foster care, or are high school students at least one year older than the expected age for their grade.


18Horn and Jang, “The Impact of Graduate Education on Teacher Effectiveness.”


...Teacher Diversity and Student Success...

couted from page 29...Racial Justice through Expanded Choice...

Students by Not Reopening Schools. Here’s How They Got It So Wrong,” Time (April 12, 2021).


The NASBE Interview

**Dr. Vermelle D. Greene**, longtime educator and a member of the Maryland State Board of Education, chaired the board’s Task Force on Achieving Academic Equity and Excellence for Black Boys, which released its report, “Transforming the Culture of Maryland’s Schools for Black Boys,” in April.
**Dr. Miya T. Simpson** is the board’s executive director. They were interviewed in June.

What sparked your interest in the education of Black boys?

**Green**: Although I began my educational career teaching high school, it wasn’t until I became an elementary school administrator that I first became aware of inequities with the treatment and education of boys. Since I worked in Prince George's County, which has a majority-minority school population, the inequities I witnessed were predominantly between Black boys and Black girls. I remember walking the halls past the talented and gifted classrooms, and I saw mainly girls. Then I would go past the special education rooms, and I saw mainly boys. One day, I had assigned several students to in-school suspension for a variety of rules infractions. As the coordinator lined them up to go into her classroom for the day, I saw boy, boy, boy, girl, boy, boy, boy, girl. I wondered, “What’s happening with our boys? They’re not stupid, and they keep getting in trouble.”

I began to do some reading and happened upon author Michael Gurian [who wrote] *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*. I thought, “Wait! Boys and girls learn differently? No one ever told us that.” During undergrad and graduate work, seminars, and workshops, we talked about multiple intelligences and about visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory learners, but we were never taught that the way that a boy’s brain processes information—in other words, the way he learns—is different from the way a girl learns. Later, I viewed brain scans of both sexes—the male brain, when doing certain mechanical and spatial tasks, for example, shows increased activity in certain areas. Not so much for those same areas when the female brain does the same tasks. On the other hand, when you look at scans of the female brain during language-related tasks, areas of her brain will show much more increased activity than the same areas in the male brain. My research eventually led to my epiphany: There is a difference in the way our boys learn, but they are being taught the same way as our girls. Could this be why the boys are not succeeding as well as the girls?

When I retired, I began to imagine starting a school only for boys, where teachers are trained in how boys learn and where we can tailor our instruction to the way they learn best. I knew my pastor wanted to start a Christian school, so I presented my proposal and received unanimous church board approval to proceed to open a program just for boys.

Not wanting to reinvent the wheel, I contacted the Maryland State Department of Education and asked, “Can you refer me to another K-8 school where they’re educating boys, where I can go and get ideas?” To my amazement, the person I talked to in the
nonpublic school office told me, "A school for boys? Kindergarten to grade 8? There are none.” Despite having no model for either curricula or operation, we set out to forge new ground, started S.A.C.R.E.D. Life Academy for Boys, and successfully educated boys for 14 years before limited finances forced our closing.

Years later, I was invited to speak at a teachers conference in Virginia attended by over 300 administrators and teachers. I asked them, “How many of you have ever taken a class on how boys learn differently than girls?” Maybe 25 hands were raised. Even to this day, there continues to be minimal professional development or training available in boy-girl learning differences for our teachers.

Generally, data demonstrate that our boys are underperforming when compared to their female peers, especially in reading and language arts. However, when data are disaggregated by race as well as by gender, the lowest performing group of young people in our schools nationwide are Black boys.

When I began on the [state] board, I would often ask, “Can we get this testing and discipline data disaggregated by gender?” I wanted my colleagues on the board to see that if data are disaggregated by gender—not just by poverty, disabilities, or race—the disparities in the performance for our boys, especially our Black boys, would be glaringly evident.

During my first year, I was asked to head a task force on student discipline. We worked for six months, looking at discipline policies of districts and the state and school-to-prison pipeline reports. Through it all, I kept saying to my task force members, “You know what’s at the root of this? We have boys who are not being successful in school, who are acting out because they’re not learning.” It is not the boys on the honor roll who are fighting and getting suspended or the boys getting straight As who are disrupting class. It’s the boys who are failing, who can’t read. Instead of being embarrassed because they don’t know or understand the material, they'd rather become the class clown or confrontational and defiant. That’s at the root of the discipline issues.

Someone who knew of my constant and vocal advocacy on behalf of our boys in Maryland schools gave me a copy of the “Report of the Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African-American Males” that was published in 2006. That task force worked for over three years and had a wonderful set of recommendations, packaged in a nice glossy cover, with beautiful pictures. Three years later, the department convened a work group to study how the recommendations could be implemented. That was 2010, and in 2020, the problems persisted— growing discipline, decreasing achievement.

Therefore, I proposed to our state board that another task force be charged to study the problem and develop a new set of recommendations to address the underperformance of Black boys and young men in Maryland’s schools. However, this time, we would take a different approach.

I wanted experienced, career educators who knew what it was to stand in front of 35 youngsters and teach, even if some of them didn’t want to learn. We recruited 22 members for our task force who collectively had over 435 years of education experience, including as superintendents, board members, teachers, principals, and instructional specialists.

Key recommendations addressed the need for our teachers to be trained on how to educate Black boys. Also it was vital that our boys are taught to read as well as our girls. Overall, our students are not doing well in reading and language arts, and a key reason for their poor performance is how they’re being taught. We strongly recommended implementing systematic, explicit phonics instruction.

What makes you hopeful that implementation will be different than it was for previous task forces?

I told task force members we didn’t want “pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by” recommendations. Instead, we wanted strategies and methods that are attainable for school districts and doable in the typical classroom. We had educators on our task force who knew how to make it work. Also, we knew that the Maryland state board members were supportive and going to monitor [the implementation of recommendations].
We wanted to make sure that we had accountability built into the report. When the state board had given its approval of the final report, I told the task force members, “You have to be there at board meetings from now on, saying, ‘Wait a minute. In the report, didn’t it say that you’re going to be doing this? But we don’t see that happening.’ You can’t give up the fight. You have to hold the state board accountable.”

The report’s next steps are key to implementing the recommendations. An advisory council will be formed to assume the leadership for the initiative and begin the implementation phase. We knew Dr. [Karen] Salmon was retiring in June, and there was talk that maybe we should wait until our new superintendent comes in July. But when these students—especially our boys—come back after being out of school for a year and a half, they’re going to be even more of a challenge for schools and teachers trying to reorient them to new school environments with new expectations. What better time than this for a new beginning?

The president of our state board, Clarence Crawford, said, “Vermelle, you’re going to have to include some schools to pilot these recommendations for proof of concept.” So early in our process, I began to reach out to principals, asking them if they would be amenable. I later invited them to attend our meetings and provide input as we formulated the recommendations.

Proof of concept is the driving force behind the implementation of the recommendations. The goal of our pilot schools is to see suspension rates coming down. We want to see improvements with report cards and GPAs and in formative and summative assessments. We want to receive positive anecdotal data from teachers, administrators, and parents.

We currently have 14 pilot schools representing 8 school districts. Each school was required to form an implementation team—five to nine people, including a building administrator, teachers, counselor, a community or business leader, and a parent. In addition, we asked the high school teams to include a student.

These teams have the responsibility of overseeing the recommendations at their respective schools. Furthermore, the advisory council will assist team members to provide professional development, supplemental training, and help schools with monitoring and assessing the recommendations.

Will pilot schools report back?

Absolutely! That’s going to be key for proof of concept. We provided detailed instructions describing the roles for the implementation teams along with the responsibilities for pilot school principals to ensure accountability. We limited the number of pilot schools to start, because the advisory council members wanted to have a manageable number of schools that we could effectively oversee, that we could visit and review their data. A member from the Office of Research is on the advisory council. He will be working with the district-level data collection offices.

We’re also asking the pilot school principals and their staff to help spread the word. Several of these strategies may be unfamiliar for some parents. For example, we have one school that wants to have single-gender classes. Title IX guidelines must be followed to the letter, which takes a great deal of administrative preparation and advance communication with the parents, who may not understand how those classes will work and the benefits for the children. Most importantly, the teachers will need initial and ongoing training to be effective.

It will be vital for our pilot schools to begin to change the culture and environment of their buildings. The teachers must have a heart for their boys, gain their trust, and gain their respect. I tell teachers that when you’ve bonded with a boy, he will jump through hoops for you. He will work hard. He will be committed to success because he wants your approval. This is especially true with our Black boys, who often feel disrespected by some teachers and sometimes by society. They must feel that you respect them and that you want to help them succeed. But at the same time, I tell teachers not to lower their standards but help their boys to rise to the standards. They don’t need you to feel sorry for them. These youngsters need teachers to equip them with the skills needed for success in school and in life.
Crawford, shared how he had come through high school and couldn’t read because he was dyslexic. Despite his disability, he overcame and excelled. [Superintendent] Salmon could see that same data, so it was relatively easy to get her support. Two members of our board, Dr. Joan Mele-McCarthy and Senator Gail Bates, came to me without my even asking and offered their assistance.

After the board’s approval of the final report, Dr. Salmon asked me a question that no one has ever asked me in all my years as an educator: “How much money do you need to make it happen?” I was speechless. She allocated $1 million to start, and the other $2 million will come in years two and three. The [pilot] schools will be getting their notice of grant award soon and then will begin to write their action plans and budgets. Someone once told me that to make anything happen, all that is needed is money and a maniac. While I wouldn’t call us maniacs, we are passionate. Now we have the money and the determination to make it happen.

The task force report presents a recommendation, a roadblock, and a strategy for overcoming it. Why was that important?

I borrowed that format from the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse. It’s very practical and user-friendly. I appreciate that the approach is not to only tell me the problems I’m going to have but suggest approaches to circumvent those problems. Don’t just give me recommendations; give me ideas, strategies, and ways to make those recommendations work.

Those suggested approaches and strategies are designed to prime the pump, so to speak. Teachers and administrators are extremely creative and know their populations. When they look at our strategies, they might say, “Instead of doing it that way, perhaps we can take that little piece and do it this way and put our own slight twist to it.” We wanted to give them something practical that they weren’t merely going to look at and put into a filing cabinet. To the contrary, we want this [report] to be an often-used

**Why is the Maryland state board well positioned to do this work?**

The key part was having the data disaggregated, not just by race but also by gender. Many state boards aren’t doing that. They only follow the reporting requirements of the U.S. Department of Education, [which] doesn’t require the data be disaggregated by gender for [school] report cards. Unless state or even local boards begin to drill down into the data in all forms, the problem with our Black boys will be less obvious to policymakers and parents.

The Maryland state board members I’ve worked with over the past three years have been phenomenal. When they started analyzing the same data I had been requesting, they were disturbed and wanted to do something. I commend our board president at that time, who supported the proposal and placed it on the board agenda for discussion and approval. Our current board president, Clarence Crawford, shared how he had come through high school and couldn’t read because he was dyslexic. Despite his disability, he overcame and excelled. [Superintendent] Salmon could see that same data, so it was relatively easy to get her support. Two members of our board, Dr. Joan Mele-McCarthy and Senator Gail Bates, came to me without my even asking and offered their assistance.

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the ones most successful in virtual learning environments: those students who were self-disciplined, independent learners, effective communicators, good at reading and writing and willing to ask for help, highly intrinsically motivated, students with strong time management and technology skills, students with a clear and dedicated interest in online learning, and students with clear structure at home. For those of us familiar with boys and how they learn, those qualities are not often there.

I'm speaking in generalities, because there are some little boys who did thrive in virtual learning. However, when I saw "self-disciplined, good readers and writers, independent learners, strong time management skills," I didn't recognize the typical male learner. [I saw] my little boys, whose moms said, "Okay, Johnny. I'm going to work now. Don't forget to log onto your computer at 10 o'clock." And as Johnny watches his mom get in her car, he switches on his video game or slips out the backdoor to the basketball court.

What can other state boards learn from this work? What obstacles might they find?

One of the obstacles is the fallacy that boys don't need help—it's the girls who need help and are not excelling. But data don't lie. In the 1980s, when girls weren't doing as well in math and the sciences, [states and districts] began to change the curricula. Girls tend to do better in language arts, [so they began] to put more language arts into math. It wasn't good enough to know that 5 plus 5 is 10. The student had to explain why the answer was 10 and write the steps they followed to arrive at that answer. Girls began to pull ahead of boys, not just in Maryland but internationally.

However, while math curricula were made more girl-friendly, why couldn't the curricula developers work to make the language arts and reading programs more boy-friendly?

Those are the steps the state and local boards can take: Make sure that they are looking at the data and the curricula, that they're considering some of the biases against boys, such as that boys will be boys and girls are better students, or...
that that's how boys are, and that's how they will always perform.

**Simpson:** Some of the policy-related potential concerns or opportunities start with the question that opens the report: “Why Black boys?” Just getting people to confront, accept, and then buy in to this whole notion around why this work is important starts to frame the policy discussion. If you have to struggle with people to get them to understand why it’s important, then that same resistance is going to be there if and when you start to make policy change.

In Maryland, there is both state and local control, so there are certain things that can be done at the state level, and certain times when the state board will exercise authority, but locals also have a whole lot of autonomy. Finding the right spaces and opportunities to be able to reconcile the two is important.

At the board meeting right after the task force report was presented, there was a presentation from the department about how they had made recommendations for some regulatory changes in the equity regulations and guidebook that Maryland has in place. They reviewed the report and looked for areas where some of those task force recommendations [could be] integrated into regulatory changes and into the equity guide.

**Greene:** The Maryland school report card that is displayed on the department website shows how well schools have done [by] equity groups. But what isn’t shown are [data] disaggregated by gender. In reality, the scores of Black girls have propped up the scores of Black boys. The data are not a true picture of how the boys are doing. So we made the recommendation that the Maryland school report card should show data disaggregated by gender and not just by race. Other states should also consider how their data are reported to their stakeholders.

**Simpson:** Another [change] was related to the educational equity regulation, requiring deescalation and other evidence-based interventions and training for staff. Another was around including, and building capacity for, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and antibias. You have recommendations around Advanced Placement courses and addressing reduced enrollment.

The task force has been disassembled, but now there’s an advisory council that’s moving forward. Establishment of the advisory council [was] priority action A in the report. Priority action B, identification of pilot schools, has been pretty much completed. Priority action C, providing guidance to the districts, is part of the work that will be done through the advisory council and the priority schools, but I consider it in progress. Priority action D is the creation of an Office for Achievement of Academic Excellence and Equity for Black Boys. That is still very much part of the immediate next-step priority actions.

**Greene:** I don’t think any other state has an office dedicated to the academic achievement of Black boys. I believe Maryland would be the first to elevate addressing this issue to the state level. The advisory council would then transition into that office.

We want to demonstrate proof of concept in Maryland and encourage other states to replicate our methods. It’s not rocket science. It just takes determination, money, passionate people, and commitment. Although the money helps tremendously, many of the recommendations don’t require an inordinate amount of money. It primarily requires educators to be creative and to use resources already at hand. It requires a commitment to making a difference in the lives of these young people and steadfastly refusing to allow them to fail. Because if our Black boys are in trouble, so are we all.
The dog chasing a car is the classic metaphor for a futile attempt to reach one’s goals. It assumes the car will always outpace the dog, who at some point stops the pursuit and turns around to find the next car to chase. It seems this is the case with many pursuits in improving state education systems. State education policymakers fix on a desired goal, chase it, tire of the effort or realize its futility, and then they cast their gaze about for that next car.

Why is this the case? What is it about our goal setting that often leaves us coming up short and abandoning one pursuit in favor of another? Now is the perfect time for members of state boards of education to be asking these essential questions.

While the COVID-19 pandemic certainly wreaked havoc on all aspects of our collective lives, it also left in its wake a unique opportunity for states to conduct a serious review of their education systems and set realistic and attainable goals for the next decade. With unprecedented need has come unprecedented funding, data, and a widespread desire for real change.

Conventional wisdom has many state boards asking, “Where do we see education moving as we exit the pandemic?” During this critical time, boards must reframe the question, asking, “Where can we, the state board of education, take education as we exit the global pandemic?” It is not about what you are recovering from but what you are recovering to.

A reframed mind-set should accompany this reframed question, one that acknowledges four components: knowledge, experience, resources, and political will. Let’s begin with knowledge. A tremendous amount of research and evidence reveals exactly how children learn, how they best interact and adapt, what acceleration models work, and, most important, what does not. This evidence should form the basis of all board goal setting.

Second, boards have experience from the pandemic on which to draw. The data generated from pre- and mid-pandemic learning illuminate the most glaring needs of students, families, and schools. When paired with the knowledge of how children learn, these experiences can be the catalyst for powerful, results-driven action.

Third, states have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to operationalize lasting actions because of the federal investment in recovery. In a year in which states are receiving the equivalent of seven times previous annual federal funding in a single year, there is real opportunity for success. But the real power lies in component 4—political will. Knowledge, experience, and resources are lifeless and ineffective without it. State boards must embrace the challenge, establish aggressive agendas, and then stay the course in relentless pursuit of their goals.

I often say that in education we can’t seem to get traction, but we can sure get whiplash. Will this time be different? Will we continue to chase one car, only to turn around and pursue the next? Or will be this be our legacy moment, in which we do the right thing and finally catch the dreams we have long chased? For the sake of our children and our nation’s future, I hope we do.
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New Research from Curriculum Associates Reveals Trends in Student Learning during the 2020–2021 School Year

i-Ready data reveals at the end of the 2020–2021 school year, the largest amount of unfinished learning was in early elementary grades, and the needs in mathematics were greater than in reading.1 Overall, fewer students were on grade level in reading and mathematics compared to historical averages, but the effects were felt disproportionately among students in low-income schools and schools serving mostly Black or Latino students.2

Access our research on unfinished learning at CurriculumAssociates.com/UnfinishedLearning.

Find resources for using ESSER funding to identify, measure, and address unfinished learning at CurriculumAssociates.com/Grants-and-Funding.

1 Based on i-Ready Diagnostic data from the fall, winter, and spring assessments in the 2020–2021 school year in reading and mathematics, from more than 250,000 students in Grades K–8.

2 Academic Achievement at the End of the 2020–2021 School Year: Insights after More Than a Year of Disrupted Teaching and Learning.