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Editor’s Note

Valerie Norville
Editorial Director

Even the most casual reader cannot miss the tie that binds the contributions in this issue: Students who are engaged in learning—whether in the classroom or outside of it—are those making connections to interesting, real-world problems throughout the school day, to adults at school, and to their peers. But given the widespread reports of increased student disengagement, this vision for learning environments appears to be easy to describe but challenging toanimate at scale.

Union College’s Jennifer Fredricks sounds an optimistic note as she lays out the case for state and district leaders to address student engagement head on. “A disengaged student can become engaged: Levels of engagement are neither fixed nor predetermined,” Fredricks writes. She relates evidence that efforts to increase engagement can change students’ trajectories academically, socially, and behaviorally.

Travis Pillow and Robin Lake of the Center for Reimagining Public Education call attention to the particular challenges facing high school students who are not engaged: a shorter time horizon for catching up on learning missed during the pandemic and less assessment data to help state leaders, school leaders, and educators gauge what efforts are sticking.

Students’ connectedness at school is both knowable and actionable, writes Bob Balfanz, Johns Hopkins University professor and head of the GRAD Partnership collaborative. He gives examples of high schools that have set up student success teams to identify and nurture students’ relationships at school and make sure that truly no child gets left behind or left to founder.

Disengaged students often vote with their feet. Hedy Chang, founder of Attendance Works, urges state boards and district leaders to take a systemic approach to shoring up the conditions of learning that ensure children will show up for school. Chang details the good work Connecticut is doing on several fronts to reduce chronic absence.

Bellwether’s Hailly T.N. Korman delves deeper into the question of who is missing from school and why. She cites systemic actions by three districts and the state of Utah to analyze data, improve interagency coordination, and ensure that students with the most challenges to regular attendance get the adult mentoring and high-dosage tutoring they need.

Ohio State University’s Edward Fletcher speaks to the efficacy of career academies for engaging high school students in learning that is project based, hands on, and relevant to their aspirations. He ticks off four elements that make these academies successful and the research to support it.

Mental health challenges—including those brought on by traumatic events children experienced before and during the pandemic—are surely an important obstacle to engaging many students in learning. Researchers Nicole Reddig and Janet VanLone review the evidence on the incidence of adverse childhood experiences and suggest actions state boards can take to ensure that teachers and school social workers are prepared to address the needs of students who are struggling with trauma.

No doubt about it, student disengagement is an old problem. But, as Korman writes, “[s]chool closures during the pandemic magnified student disengagement and laid bare the underlying challenges. It has become harder to look away.”
Our students are capable of more than we know. When they have agency in their learning, they lean in to educational experiences that reflect who they are, who they want to be, and what they want to do after graduation. One way Washington students show us what they know is through the Washington State Board of Education’s Student Communicators internship program, launched this year. We received over 100 applications from students passionate about communications, outreach, and storytelling. In January 2023, the state board hired two of them as paid interns to help reach their peers:

**Star Mendoza.** Star’s love of film, video, and anchoring her school news drew her to this internship. She is practiced in social media and has achieved over one million views on one of her short TikTok videos. Wallaroo media reports that TikTok has about 80 million monthly active users in the United States. Sixty percent are between the ages of 16 and 24. As the state board applied Star’s talent and passion for outreach, we found more and more students were engaged. In one project, Star interviewed state board members so the public could get to know them in a more personable way—and in a way in which students can relate. The video had over 2,000 views in its first few weeks. Star has featured students as well: one who is an aspiring tattoo artist, and another who wants to be a pediatric travel nurse. Both videos get to the heart of meaningful education: engaging, personalized, hands-on experiences.

**Indiana Hilmes.** Indiana got a front-row seat for policy discussions and government processes, and her ability to translate complicated policy materials into easy-to-understand copy was an asset to our team. Indiana learned that she wants to be involved in public policy—that a career in communications might not be her first choice. She worked on the state board’s “elevator speech”—a plain, succinct way to explain who we are and what we do. Indiana is also interested in the board’s work on mastery-based learning.

Our inaugural intern cohort demonstrates the program’s dual benefits: It enhances interns’ understanding of the state educational system, and it gives them the hands-on, personalized experiences they need to achieve their goals after high school.

I would encourage any state board that considers hiring interns to ensure they are compensated. Their perspectives are valuable. Also, consider removing GPA requirements or other qualifying barriers for potential interns.

Because of the impact our interns have, we plan to continue this program, with Star and Indy sitting on the interview panel for the next interns. We see an increase in “likes” and “shares” on teen-facing platforms and in the number of students attending our webinars. Most important, we feel we are authentically engaging with students. When they help us create and when we collaborate, we are inspired, and we are more knowledgeable when we write policy and advocate on their behalf.
State Board Voice

Kentucky’s Portrait of a Learner

Many Kentucky schools and districts have journeyed toward deeper, more personalized learning as a path to equity for all learners. As part of that journey, educational leaders across the commonwealth are developing portraits of a learner—sometimes called portraits of a graduate—to redefine and enhance expectations for preK-12 learners and on into postsecondary. A portrait can serve as an Archimedean lever that ultimately makes the learner experience more personally relevant, engaging, and reflective of the learning and career challenges that students will face in the fast-paced, interconnected, tech-driven world of 2023.

When the Kentucky Board of Education adopted the Kentucky Portrait of a Learner in October 2022, we joined several other states that have adopted state-level portraits. In so doing, we hoped to model the process and cast a vision that embraced the power of locally adopted portraits. It is our hope that all Kentucky districts will follow suit—by defining, communicating, and measuring the skills and dispositions that are critical to student success. Simply put, a portrait of a learner is an agreed-upon set of aspirations for what every learner will know and be able to do when they transition to their next phase.

No matter when students demonstrate a skill named in the portrait—whether it is communication, collaboration, or problem solving—the skill remains constant as learners progress toward it. For instance, third graders can demonstrate collaboration through group projects and activities in school but also in scouting, soccer, church youth group, or afterschool programs. When that skill is assessed at a checkpoint—say at the end of grade 8—teachers will see more nuanced and sophisticated skill development. This progression is akin to what happens from t-ball to coach-pitch baseball to Babe Ruth League and beyond. The skill does not change; kids just get better at it.

Inherent in portrait implementation is a shift to performance-based assessment, in addition to the knowledge-based assessments teachers use most often. In performance assessment systems, teachers use scoring guides and other tools to gauge how students’ skills progress. They give students frequent feedback and opportunities to practice skills, much like students practice sports or rehearse music. Performance assessment systems often culminate with public presentations such as exhibition nights and student-led conferences.

When fully implemented, portraits of a learner become the lever by which teachers, schools, and communities rebalance learning expectations to include a broader, more enduring set of aspirations for content mastery, essential workplace skills employers want, and human qualities that we all want for a global citizenry. The net effect of creating a portrait of a learner with community partners, and putting that portrait in place in every classroom, is that these essential skills and dispositions become as important as the narrow academic content we focused almost exclusively on throughout the No Child Left Behind era. They do not replace academic content; they extend knowledge to relevant, real-world application. Portraits of a learner are a powerful lever for producing the mind-sets and innovation that the world will require.
Student Voice

Removing Barriers to Student Leadership

In the September 2022 issue of the Standard, students from the District of Columbia State Board of Education offered three ways to boost state boards engagement with students: including a student member seat on the board, creating a space specifically for student voice, and requiring student consultation on policy in bylaws. Inspired by what I have seen in my community, state, and state board, I want to provide a few more recommendations to encourage state leaders to support student members in their development as leaders.

Supporting student members from the start of their term leads to an environment where they feel comfortable engaging with adults when tough policy topics arise. Helping student members grow as leaders helps them better represent their peers. Programs like NASBE's Student Engagement Collaborative and organizations like the National Student Board Member Association have provided me spaces to build relationships with other student members, engage with subject-matter experts, and learn strategies to be more effective.

It is important to encourage students to engage with a wide variety of policymakers. I co-chair the Maine Department of Education Student Cabinet, a student-led body that regularly interacts with department staff, legislators, and other policymakers. Student involvement is a two-way street: Just as students benefit from having their voices heard and having opportunities to grow as leaders, adults benefit as well. This spring, the Student Cabinet presented on student mental health needs to Maine’s Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. They provided the legislators with a diverse set of perspectives they rarely hear in the State House.

To make sure that policymakers hear from students, it is important to break down barriers to student engagement and ensure a diverse range of voices at the table. A barrier as simple as a lack of access to transportation can make the difference between a student who is able to share a perspective and one who is not. Other barriers are more systemic, such as application processes that prioritize GPA or adult recommendations, which can leave out important and underrepresented voices. Considering whether an applicant has experienced hardship in their educational experience, is coming from a nontraditional educational model, or is a member of an underrepresented or marginalized community can also expand the number of student perspectives that policymakers can access.

While student voice has often been missing from policy discussions, the movement to engage students in education policymaking has made significant headway, with 33 states now involving more than 400 students. My experience as a board member and as the chair of a student advisory group has shown me just how important engaging students is in creating a more effective, equitable, and just education system for all. Whether it be a student-led presentation to legislators on the mental health needs of students or a conversation with policymakers on the need for a more diverse, inclusive curriculum, students can provide invaluable insights to those making the decisions that impact students the most.
Getting Students Engaged in Learning

Before COVID, 40 to 60 percent of students were showing signs of disengagement in learning, according to national surveys. The signs included lack of participation and effort, acting out and disrupting class, dissatisfaction and withdrawal, and reliance on superficial learning strategies that do not lead to deep learning. The pandemic exacerbated students’ disengagement, especially among the most vulnerable youth. In a November 2020 survey by EdWeek Research Center, over 80 percent of teachers said that student motivation and engagement had declined since the pandemic.

Although researchers do not yet fully know the extent of disengagement during COVID and the long-term consequences of this disengagement on academic outcomes, early research is concerning. Moreover, this research shows the pandemic’s disproportionately negative impact on low-income and minority youth.

One of the biggest impacts of the pandemic has been on attendance. Among enrolled K-12 students, attendance was substantially lower in 2020–21 than in prior years. Chronic absenteeism also increased during the pandemic. National data from the U.S. Department of Education showed that over 10 million students were chronically absent during the first year of COVID, compared with approximately 8 million in previous years.

The pandemic also widened the achievement gap. Research from Brookings shows a sizable drop in achievement for all students. This drop is significantly larger than drops in achievement after other large-scale school disruptions, such as Hurricane Katrina. Even more concerning is the widening achievement gap between students in low- and high-poverty elementary schools.

Several factors may explain the decline in student engagement, including variations in students’ ability to access virtual learning, limited contact with teachers, staffing shortages, a reduction in overall instructional time, lack of hands-on learning opportunities and time with peers, increases in students’ mental health challenges due to social isolation, and students’ limited access to academic enrichment, special education services, and other social and emotional supports. For many of these students, physical school closures meant literally no school, for days and even weeks. These challenges were most evident in schools serving minoritized and low-income student populations.

The better news is that an explosion of research, policy, and practitioner work has led to greater understanding of student engagement (see box 1) and has uncovered practices that get students actively engaged in the classroom. By adopting them, schools can help all students develop the skills, competencies, and values they need to graduate and transition to adulthood. Students can thus avoid a host of problems related to disengagement: low achievement, high dropout rates, alienation, and lack of motivation. And state policymakers can create the policy environment that makes engaged classrooms a reality for all students.

How It Happens

Many common classroom and school practices are contributing to high levels of disengagement. Most classrooms still emphasize teacher-directed instruction, in which students are passive recipients of knowledge. Students work individually on tasks that tend to stifle engagement. Most of these tasks require students to reproduce knowledge that is shared only with their teacher. They must wait to get feedback, and they have limited opportunities to drive what and how they learn.

Another reason some students disengage is that they have not developed strong relationships with their teachers, or worse,
Box 1. Student Engagement Defined

Engagement is a multidimensional construct with three distinct, yet interrelated dimensions: behavior, emotional, and cognitive.\textsuperscript{4} Viewing engagement as multidimensional gives us a richer picture of how students act, feel, and think in the classroom.

Behavioral engagement is defined in terms of involvement and participation in classroom and school contexts, school-related conduct, and the absence of disruptive behavior. Students who are behaviorally engaged participate in classroom tasks and school activities, put forth effort, pay attention, concentrate, complete work on time, and exhibit positive conduct.

Emotional engagement describes students’ positive and negative reactions to class and school, the quality of their relationships with peers, and their attachment to school. Students who are emotionally engaged are interested in what they are learning, happy at school, and perceive that their peers accept, include, and respect them.

Cognitive engagement focuses on students’ psychological investment in learning. Students who are cognitively engaged go beyond what is required, direct effort at learning and mastering content rather than completing the task or getting the highest grade, use self-regulated behaviors such as planning and monitoring when solving a task, and persist when a task is challenging.

Researchers have identified patterns of engagement across these three types.\textsuperscript{5} One is the fully engaged student, who exhibits high behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Such students are easy to teach. They actively participate, are interested in school, and use deep learning strategies to help them master content. This pattern is associated with the most favorable academic outcomes.

Another common pattern, especially in schools in middle- and upper-class communities, is found in students who are highly engaged behaviorally but less engaged emotionally and cognitively. These students are compliant. They go through the motions of doing school but are often bored or stressed and are more likely to cheat and report that they do not learn or retain the material.

Finally, there are students who have begun to disengage behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. These students are at a higher risk of dropping out of school. Their attendance is often inconsistent, they get in trouble at school, and they find school an alienating, unsupportive place.


have developed relationships that can be characterized as conflictual. In such relationships, teachers and students are angry, show little warmth, do not communicate, and appear disconnected. Students who are at risk for disengagement are the least likely to develop positive relationships with teachers. Other students disengage because they do not feel connected to their peers, respected by them, or included. Low peer acceptance or being actively rejected by peers leads to behavioral problems, negative school attitudes, and school avoidance.\textsuperscript{10}

Demographic factors put some students at greater risk for disengagement. These factors include being male; Latinx, Black, or Native American; lower socioeconomic status; an English language learner; and in an older grade. Individual factors that put students at higher risk of disengagement include having a history of grade retention, substance abuse, mental health challenges, low academic achievement, low parent-school involvement, and a history of behavioral problems.\textsuperscript{11}

Why It Matters

Researchers have linked higher levels of student engagement to positive outcomes for students and teachers. Further, a disengaged student can become engaged: Levels of engagement are neither fixed nor predetermined.

Positive student outcomes. Student engagement is predictive of academic success. Engaged students have better grades, academic achievement test scores, and school completion rates than students who are not engaged. Student engagement can also protect against risky behaviors. Students who are engaged have lower rates of delinquency, substance use, and depression.\textsuperscript{12}

Impacts on teachers. Teachers rate student disengagement as one of their biggest stressors and as a factor in teacher burnout.\textsuperscript{13} Many teachers report spending much of their time dealing with behavioral problems and with students’ boredom and nonparticipation, which limits other students’ opportunities to learn and interferes with teachers’ ability to teach effectively. Conversely, having highly engaged students makes teaching more intrinsically rewarding.

Engagement is malleable. Changes to classroom and school practices can increase engagement.\textsuperscript{14} For this reason, increasing engagement is a key goal of many prevention and intervention strategies, especially in secondary school. As an explanatory variable for achievement, deep learning, and school completion, student engagement offers more insight into the
effectiveness of these strategies than unalterable demographic and individual characteristics do.

What Increases Engagement?

Engagement reflects the interaction between individual and contextual factors in students’ learning experiences. While individual predictors of engagement are less malleable, changes to the academic and social environment can increase engagement.

Individual predictors. Several student characteristics make it easier or harder to create an engaging classroom: prior achievement, self-efficacy, goal orientation, a focus on learning and understanding, and perceptions of the importance of school.13

Classroom predictors. Where students have developed strong relationships with their teachers and peers, feel connected, and have a say in decision making, and where tasks are varied, challenging, interesting, and relevant to their lives and experiences, classrooms are more engaging. In engaged classrooms, teachers hold high expectations and give consistent, clear feedback; have consistent and fair discipline practices; establish classroom routines and procedures; create opportunities for students to work with and get to know their classmates; and provide opportunities for deep understanding, critical thinking, and problem solving.14 Table 1 presents practical strategies teachers can use to increase behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in the classroom.

School-level factors. Engagement is higher in smaller schools, where it is easier for students to develop relationships with their teachers and peers; where students can participate in a diverse array of extracurricular activities; where there is fairness and flexibility in school rules; where there are high standards and enriching, diverse learning opportunities in and out of the classroom; where there are opportunities to personalize learning; and where there is a collective responsibility for increasing student engagement.15

Table 2 lists sample engagement interventions, highlighted because they have been evaluated using rigorous methodological techniques; there

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A disengaged student can become engaged: Levels of engagement are neither fixed nor predetermined.
State policymakers should establish clear, measurable goals for increasing engagement.

is evidence that these interventions increase behavioral, emotional, and/or cognitive engagement; and they include multiple components to increase engagement at both the student and school levels.

How to Assess Engagement

The most feasible methods for educators and policymakers to assess engagement are student surveys, teacher ratings, observations, and administrative data. To help schools select measures that are appropriate for their needs, my colleagues and I compared 21 self-report surveys, teacher ratings, and observational measures of student engagement.18

Self-report methods are the most common assessment technique because surveys can be administered to large, diverse groups of students at low cost, making it possible to compare results across settings. Another method is to have teachers rate individual students on items about their behavior, emotion, and cognition. This technique is particularly useful with young children and with students who have limited literacy skills. Practitioners extensively use teacher rating scales to screen children for social and behavioral problems and to inform intervention-related decisions.

Another way to assess engagement is to directly observe individuals, targeted students, or a whole classroom, mostly on indicators of behavioral engagement. Because students can hide their emotions and thinking, it is more challenging to assess emotional and cognitive engagement through observational techniques.

Administrative data that schools already collect—on attendance, truancy, problem behaviors, credits earned, graduation rates, and course enrollment and completion—can also be used to both assess engagement and disengagement. These data can form part of an early warning system to identify students who are showing signs of disengagement and to direct appropriate interventions to these students.

Implications for State Policy

There are also tasks at the state level to prioritize student engagement.

Support a shared vision on equity and increasing student engagement. It is critical that all stakeholders work together to develop and communicate an equity-oriented, shared vision of student engagement that assumes all students can learn, teachers and schools can increase engagement for all students, and that there is a collective responsibility to support student engagement and learning. Such a vision will require a shift from a deficit perspective that blames students, families, and poverty for low engagement to a strengths-based approach that builds on students’ individual and cultural assets and is framed by the belief that, with the appropriate support, it is possible to reengage even the most disengaged students. State policymakers should establish clear, measurable goals for increasing engagement, align resources to support these goals, and collect data to see how well schools are meeting these goals.

Invest in robust data systems. Data can help identify students at risk for disengagement and ultimately dropping out of school. Many schools collect data on attendance, behavior, and academic performance as part of early warning systems. Data on student engagement are also important in identifying, designing, and evaluating effective interventions. They help identify students in need of additional interventions as well determining the types of and levels of support that are required.19

Invest in holistic interventions. There is evidence that investing in holistic intervention support leads to higher behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.20 Some examples include individual and group counseling, tutoring and extended summer learning programs, attendance monitoring, family support and parent training, afterschool activities, social and emotional learning programs, bullying prevention, instructional reforms, teacher training on strategies to increase engagement, and mentoring. States should partner with community stakeholders who work in mental health, family support, and social services to coordinate both school and community resources for the most disengaged youth.

Invest in hiring, retaining, and supporting teachers. State policymakers play a key role in recruiting, training, and setting compensation levels to encourage a diverse group of new teachers to both enter and stay in the profession. Retention is especially important for student engagement in urban districts, where student
### Table 2. Sample Engagement Interventions

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<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Population</th>
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| **Seattle Social Development Project** | Proactive classroom management  
Interactive teaching  
Social skills training  
Teacher training  
Parent training | Grade 1–6 |
| **Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS)** | Attendance, behavior, and achievement monitoring  
Mentoring  
Counseling  
Social skills training  
Parent training  
Community collaboration | Latinx high school students |
| **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** | Schoolwide expectations for social, emotional skills  
Social and emotional training  
Academic supports  
Changes to disciplinary practices  
Individualized interventions  
Family-school partnerships | K–12 |
| **Check and Connect** | Mentoring  
Systematic monitoring of engagement  
Individualized interventions  
Family support | K–12 |
| **Diplomas Now** | Instructional reforms and support for teachers  
Early warning system  
Small learning communities  
Social and emotional learning  
Targeted academic support  
Counseling  
Family support and case management | Middle and high school |
| **Career Academies** | Technical and academic curriculum around broad theme  
Partnership between school and industry  
Small learning communities | High School |
| **Caring School Community** | Social and emotional learning  
Teacher training  
Changes to disciplinary practices  
Family involvement  
Schoolwide community programs to build community | K–8 |
| **My Teaching Partner** | Teacher training on teacher-student interactions  
One-on-one coaching  
Engagement monitoring through observations | Preschool–high school |
It is hard for students to develop strong relationships with their teachers in schools where turnover is more frequent. It is also important to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers of color, who tend to be better able to connect with and relate to students of color and their families, which in turn leads to higher engagement.

Invest in professional development. Building teacher capacity is essential for increasing student engagement. State policymakers should invest in professional development that will help teachers learn how to create engaging classrooms. Such training will encompass how to strengthen relationships with students, support effective peer learning and build community, provide support for students who are at risk for disengagement, and implement motivationally and cognitively complex tasks.

Increase support for social and emotional learning. States should support social and emotional learning programs and practices, which help students manage emotions, set positive goals, feel and show empathy, form and maintain peer relationships, and make responsible decisions. When implemented effectively, these practices strengthen relationships between students and teachers, and they improve students’ attitudes, social behavior, and academic performance. They also lessen problems with student conduct and emotional distress. Relationships can also be strengthened through structural changes: for example, smaller schools, schools within schools, and advising and mentoring programs.

Support cognitively and motivationally rich curricula. Many students are disengaged because school tasks bear little resemblance to how learning happens elsewhere. Engagement is higher when students work on meaningful and authentic tasks that are connected to their personal interests and needs in their school and communities. States should encourage policies and structures that support authentic learning through internships, career academies, and project-based instructional approaches, where students work over an extended period to investigate a complex question, problem, or challenge.

2 Student Engagement during the Pandemic: Results of a National Survey, Ed Week Research Center (2021).
4 Ibid.
7 National Academies, Addressing the Long-Term Effects of the Pandemic.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
20 Fredricks, Reschly, and Christenson, Handbook of Student Engagement Interventions.
21 Ibid.
Centering School Connectedness

Students are voting with their feet. Through rising chronic absenteeism, increases in behavioral challenges, and declines in college enrollment after high school, many students are signaling that school is no longer a place they can or want to be. In short, they feel disconnected. To address this problem, high schools across the country are consolidating disparate student support efforts into a unified approach led by student success teams. State boards can support and elevate this work.

Fostering school connectedness is an effective, universal prevention measure that affects many important student

High schools are creating student success teams that prioritize relationships and leverage actionable data to reconnect students to school.

Robert Balfanz
During the pandemic, high school students who said that there was an adult at school who knew and cared about them reported 40 percent fewer mental health challenges.

Outcomes. Students who are connected to school get better grades, attend more often, have fewer behavioral challenges, graduate from high school, and go to college at higher rates than their disconnected peers.

They also have better mental and physical health and engage in fewer risky behaviors. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, students who felt close to people at school were less likely to feel persistently sad or hopeless, to have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide, and had significantly lower prevalence of poor mental health.

During the pandemic, high school students who said that there was an adult at school who knew and cared about them reported 40 percent fewer mental health challenges than students who reported there was no caring adult at school. Unfortunately, only half of high school students—and only a third from historically marginalized populations—reported that they had such a connection.

The costs of disconnection are high:

- Students lose opportunities to reach their full potential and suffer increased challenges to their mental and physical health.
- State and local school systems are locking in, and in some cases accelerating, the academic impacts of lost instruction during the pandemic—threatening the progress made from 2008 to 2019 in increasing high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment gains.
- Now and in the future, the U.S. economy and the society in general need young adults to develop lifelong interpersonal and learning skills that help them be successful now as students and navigate the workplace later on.

Prioritizing Relationships

Strong relationships are the heart of school connectedness and the means by which students who have stopped believing in school can reengage. It is possible to strengthen positive, supportive relationships 1) between students and the adults who teach them and operate their schools, 2) between students and peer groups, and 3) among school adult colleagues. Strong relationships motivate students to be in school every day and to engage in learning. Negative or unsupportive relationships can drive them away.

Some educators do not feel prepared to intentionally build relationships with students. Or they believe they were hired only to deliver lessons. Or they worry about becoming “friends” with students. But building developmental relationships with students is easier than they think and more vital for school connectedness.

The first step to developing productive, appropriate relationships is identifying how many students have good relationships and whether those relationships are improving or changing. Baseline and periodic data guide the development of strategies to foster meaningful relationships and to continuously improve.

Fortunately, this information is easy to get by simply capturing what adults in the building already know. By pooling teacher’s everyday knowledge of their students, examining school records on extracurricular participation, employing a few well-chosen survey questions, and listening to a representative sample of students in focus groups, schools can learn how many of their students have the building blocks of school connectedness and where more work needs to be done. Students are a vital source: Ask students if they believe they are engaged,
through school learning experiences and activities, in work that helps others.

**Students and Adults.** Schools can institute a relationship audit to determine which students do and do not have supportive relationships with an adult in the school. It can be as simple as teachers gathering by grade level or small learning community teams, reviewing a list of students in their cohorts, and putting a sticker next to the name of each student with whom they have a supportive relationship. And then looking to see which students on the list have no such relationships.

**Students and Students.** Teachers and other adults also can deduce the extent to which students have a supportive peer group. They can readily identify which students are usually alone and which do not engage in extracurricular activities. School staff can first calculate the percentage of the student body that actively engages in extracurriculars. The extent to which students feel they are a welcomed part of the school community can be accurately assessed through two or three short survey questions.

**Adults and Adults.** Staff surveys paired with focus groups can indicate the quality of relationships among adults on campus. Teachers serving on coordinating teams tend to value the opportunities to collaborate with and learn from their peers. Teachers who have a sense of individual and collective efficacy are more likely to stay at a school. Thus, staff retention rates may also indicate the quality of adult-to-adult relationships.

While essential and useful, these data are only valuable when they are put to use. Once schools have baseline data, a team must analyze them to identify ways students feel connected and welcome and to design ways to better support more students.

Some schools are using their survey data to discover those who did not report connections or a sense of belonging. More detailed focus group conversations with a representative sample of these students help school leaders understand what might be preventing connection and belonging. Students are invited and encouraged to offer ideas and suggestions on ways the school can support connection. Schools have set up fairs for the entire school or for a more targeted subset of students who are not reporting connections. During these events, all clubs, sports, and teams showcase their club or activity and recruit students.

**Setting Up Student Success Teams**

I head the GRAD Partnership, a consortium of nine organizations that create student success systems alongside schools and districts. The nine have each been supporting schools, districts, and state education agencies for 20 years or more. We combined efforts to help educators build robust systems that can handle the increased number of students needing support and the added dimensions of support needed in the pandemic’s wake.

Through surveys and interviews in the summer of 2022 with over 300 front-line teachers, counselors, and school leaders, the GRAD Partnership team learned that schools were seeking ways to combine disparate systems that often focus on a single need—for example, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports for behavior, Multitiered System of Supports for academic success, attendance teams for attendance, On-Track teams for dropout prevention. They sought a more holistic approach that could replace many meetings, each with a limited focus, with one meeting that addressed the full, complex range of student needs.

At the same time, many teachers and school leaders have been redesigning the schooling experience to increase students’ sense of agency and belonging. They are using student success systems as a means to make this work comprehensive and focused on improvement.

Student success teams are integral to these efforts. Teams often include teachers, a counselor, community school coordinator, special educator, and an administrator. They meet regularly to analyze key indicators of student success, including connectedness. The team then seeks to understand why students are disconnected and what might reengage them. Often, they began by listening to the student and their family.

With insights in hand, the team acts to improve students’ connections. Sometimes, their responses are tailored to a given student’s circumstances. Other times, the team sees a
Students said that the intervention they valued most was having a “champion” check in with them weekly to support their goals.

What It Looks Like

The GRAD Partnership spotlights schools that commit to student success systems. Understanding and responding to each school’s context is key because one school’s strategy may not be appropriate for another. Nevertheless, these schools demonstrate a process by which any school can improve school connectedness, among other key student outcomes. Because connectedness is essentially about building relationships and encouraging participation in extracurricular or other prosocial activities, these student success systems do not cost much. Large and small schools alike can develop them.

Manzano High. GRAD Partnership first selected Manzano High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for its positive engagement of students and staff’s regular monitoring and measuring interventions to identify the most appropriate actions, structures, and processes for the school as whole. One year after designing and piloting a student success system, their team interviewed students who had exhibited indicators of disconnection and received interventions. Listening to students led the school to create a structure, processes, and resources for teachers who would serve as advisors. Students said that the intervention they valued most was having a “champion” check in with them weekly to support their goals. During advisory sessions, teachers help students reflect, create, and execute individual student success plans that capture all four elements of a highly effective student success system.7

Manzano High, which serves more than 1,000 students, created 11 student success teams. Manzano staff listened to students who struggle with chronic absenteeism, analyzed data to identify common barriers to strong attendance, and gained understanding of the breadth of challenges facing the families they serve. In response, Manzano High School held a family resource evening to help families of students who were chronically absent identify available supports. The student senate created social media reels to raise awareness about the importance of regular attendance and timely arrival.

Southeast Lauderdale High. Nestled outside Meridian, Mississippi, Southeast Lauderdale High School serves 400 rural students from across a large area. The majority qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. In the wake of the pandemic, the school used their student success system to implement creative, inclusive ways to foster student connections, scheduled enjoyable activities that would draw students to campus, and through improved regular attendance increase course performance.

With federal relief funds, the school hired a graduation coach, Robbi Cooper, who supports the work of a student success team. The team includes seven adults: teachers, coaches, counselors, and the principal, who review biannual student surveys, interventions, and strategies for student success.

“We gained insight into [students’] internal struggles, and how they truly feel about school, themselves, and life in general,” Cooper said. “We will be able to see if there is improvement by having students fill out the survey twice a year.”

In the initial survey, the team found that 40 percent of students were not involved in any school activities beyond required courses. With these results in hand, alongside anecdotal information from direct chats and observations, the student success team tried to connect all students to a school activity, tracking results on a shared Google spreadsheet. They often sought new opportunities for students based on their interests—for example, creating positions on sports teams for photographers, data analysts, and drone camera operators.

Thomas Kelly College Preparatory. On Chicago’s southwest side, GRAD Partnership’s most recent addition to its featured schools was selected partly for how it employs student voice to build student-centered mind-sets. One of the largest schools in Chicago, Kelly College Prep reflects the economic, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity of its neighborhood. Forty percent of Kelly students are bi- or multilingual, and 93 percent are part of low-income families.

“In education, we say we are here for students, or we want to give students what they need. What I’m learning and what the research is telling us is that we hardly ever ask students what they want, but their sense of identity and connectedness is critical to helping...
them succeed in school,” said Principal Raul Magdaleno. “At Kelly, we use students’ voices to select pathways and listen to what they’re saying is happening in the classroom to impact instruction. We talk to our kids.”

Using a professional learning tool developed by the nonprofit Project for Education Research That Scales, Kelly’s teachers deploy student surveys in short cycles to try new ideas and understand how students are experiencing the changes they make. They collectively review data in cross-department professional learning communities, naming opportunities and challenges.

“During our more than a decade journey into this work, our focus has shifted from graduation rates to encompass the following: GPA, B’s or better, student voice, and the student experience,” Magdaleno said. “This work is vital in order to give our students the best possible chance at succeeding in school and in the world.”

State Boards’ Role

State boards of education play a vital role in setting conditions for districts and schools to counter the effects of the pandemic. Student success systems are equipped for this task, as well as for preparing all students to graduate high school ready for postsecondary schools or training. State board members are well positioned to raise awareness and set the context to advance these systems. They can also advocate for the resources needed to support them.

State board members can elevate the importance of student engagement and school connectedness. They can encourage districts to rethink and consolidate their student support efforts. They can talk with communities about the importance of centering positive relationships in schools as part of efforts to accelerate learning, foster students’ mental health, and increase teacher retention and overall satisfaction. They can highlight schools that are doing good work and provide opportunities for their staff to share their strategies, tools, and processes with others.

State boards can also highlight the role of community partners. They can stress the need for districts and schools to allow teachers sufficient collaboration time, ideally during the school day, to interrogate data and develop action plans.

Now is not the time to double down on punitive attendance or behavior policies that have not worked in the past. The evidence is clear that increasing all students’ school connectedness—including by purposefully building strong relationships with the most disengaged students—is the best approach.

3 The supporting research is referenced on this web page: CDC Healthy Schools, “School Connectedness;” https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/school_connectedness.htm#.

Robert Balfanz is research professor at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University School of Education and head of the GRAD Partnership collaborative. We welcome the opportunity to connect with state boards! Please connect with us at info@gradpartnership.org.
Shoring Up Conditions of Learning

When key conditions of learning are in place (figure 1), students show up, and they and their families stay engaged in school. Chronic absence reflects the erosion of these conditions.

Physical and Emotional Safety. The need for physical and emotional safety at school is a key condition for learning. When schools required students to quarantine, the need to stay home at the first sign of illness became newly ingrained on students and families. Through our work with districts across the country, my colleagues and I at Attendance Works are hearing that families and educators are now confused about when and how long students should stay home due to illness. Moreover, families working remotely may deem it easier to keep a child home rather than risking a disruption in the workday. Others may be missing school because they are catching up on health care screenings, immunizations, and checkups missed during the pandemic.

Ensuring students do not stay home unnecessarily for illness will require an intentional strategy. State and local public health and education agencies will need to develop and broadly communicate updated, consistent health guidance as well ensure and expand access to preventative health care, especially in grades, student groups, or schools experiencing the highest levels of chronic absence.

Unstable housing, unreliable transportation, unsafe paths to school, lack of access to health care, and poor nutrition can also contribute to school absences and make it harder for students to concentrate and learn even when they do go to class.

Well-Being. Also taking a toll on...
The effects of chronic absence compound, making it harder for students to stay engaged in what is being taught when they do attend.

Academic Challenge. Students and families are more likely to show up for school when they believe that what is being taught is challenging, engaging, and relevant. For older students, college and career pathways, paid internships with local businesses, and flexible scheduling to accommodate increased family and work responsibilities help students attend school.

For younger students, schools should find ways to welcome families back to school campuses so they can discover how classroom activities are nurturing their children’s development. In the aftermath of the pandemic, some schools hesitated to let families back on campus. Yet the better families understand the immediate benefit of the classroom experience, the more they prioritize their children’s attendance.

The effects of chronic absence compound, making it harder for students to stay engaged in what is being taught when they do attend, forge meaningful connections, and benefit from on-campus resources that can help address their basic needs and expand their engagement.

Figure 1. Positive Conditions for Learning Lead to Students Being Engaged and Attending Regularly
Improving attendance requires the entire community working together to ensure that families as well as school staff have what they need to support each other, grow, and thrive.

**Connecticut’s Systemic Approach**

A systemic approach to reducing chronic absence will require the state education agency (SEA) to advance on a number of fronts (figure 2). It starts with capacity building—that is, equipping educators and community partners to adopt a data-driven, problem-solving, multi-tiered approach. When attendance and chronic absence reports are accurate, accessible, timely, comprehensive, and easy to interpret, they are actionable. The first response to absenteeism should be positive engagement—eschewing a punitive approach in favor of one centered on belonging and engagement and helping everyone understand why daily attendance matters.

Strategic partnerships among the district, school, and community are essential for providing resources and supports to address the barriers to attendance. Partners’ deep commitment to adequate, equitable resources can ensure that students from all backgrounds and circumstances receive a quality education and opportunities to thrive and achieve. Because absenteeism is a cross-cutting issue that cannot be solved by any one person, department, or agency, shared accountability is the final key ingredient.

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) exemplifies the benefits of advancing and sustaining a systemic approach to reducing chronic absence. Its current multi-pronged strategy builds upon past policies and investments, some of which were made more than a decade ago.

**Actionable Data.** In 2020–21, CSDE shifted from yearly to monthly collection and release of attendance data. To ensure that districts deliver high-quality data, CSDE publicizes its definition of attendance—that is, showing up to school for half of a day for in-person and virtual learning—and data are coded by learning mode. The department also works with districts to identify

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**Figure 2. Elements of a Systemic Approach to Reducing Chronic Absence**

- **Students & Families**
- **Schools**
- **District**
- **Community**
- **Capacity Building**
- **Adequate, Equitable Resources**
- **Shared Accountability**
- **Positive Engagement**
- **Strategic Partnerships**
- **Actionable Data**

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The first response to absenteeism should be positive engagement—eschewing a punitive approach.
Connecticut saw reductions in absenteeism in every high-need population.

Positive Engagement. A 2016 law prohibits using juvenile court as a response to truancy, and CSDE gave districts a list of approved alternatives in 2018. As part of its definition and framework for family engagement, it also promoted high-impact strategies for reducing chronic absence.

LEAP built upon these earlier investments. The program prioritized establishing trusting relationships with school staff, encouraging regular attendance, and assisting families with summer placements and afterschool learning. While its main goal was ameliorating chronic absenteeism for a targeted set of students, qualitative data gathered from home visitors and families during the program evaluation revealed outcomes that are often harder to tackle and measure: improved family-school relationships, increased feelings of belonging, improved access to resources, and greater gratitude and appreciation.

Strategic Partnerships. LEAP exemplifies the critical role of partnerships. State and national partners (including Attendance Works and the Parent Teacher Home Visit Program) helped design and implement it. Regional Education Service Centers served as fiduciary and implementation partners in training, data collection, and technical support. Given the toll the pandemic was taking on existing school staff, LEAP explicitly encouraged districts to partner with community agencies to recruit added adults to conduct home visits. The program created a system for home visitors to document challenges facing families. These data helped pinpoint areas where added partnerships were needed—for example, to address a need for more bilingual materials.

Capacity Building. Over the years, Connecticut invested in building capacity to reduce chronic absence. In 2015, a state law required districts or schools to set up attendance review teams when chronic absence rates reached a certain level. CSDE created a prevention and early intervention guide for districts and virtual sessions for peer exchange. It invested in communities of practice for charter schools and districts struggling with poor attendance. This commitment carried through to LEAP, which provided training, peer exchange, and technical assistance for the program’s home visitors.

Adequate, Equitable Resources. Data on chronic absence as well as academic performance and student demographics informed the selection of districts to participate in LEAP. In addition, Connecticut’s long-standing practice has been to integrate efforts to combat chronic absence with the technical assistance offered to its lowest performing districts.

Shared Accountability. Connecticut promotes shared accountability through data transparency. In addition, CSDE and the governor bring key decision makers within and across agencies to review emerging trends and potential responses. The state’s dedication to addressing the pandemic’s impact on learning, well-being, and recovery led to creation of the Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration. It will meet CSDE’s ongoing evaluation and research needs and foster collaboration across state institutions of higher education.

The center evaluated LEAP and found it had improved participants’ attendance, results that are informing the decision to sustain the program. Attendance rates increased by four percentage points in the month following the first LEAP visit for most students. Attendance continued to rise subsequently, reaching an average increase of approximately seven percentage points for students served in summer 2021 and nearly 15 percentage points for students served during the 2021–22 school year after they had been in the program for six months. The impact was greatest for secondary students.

By the end of May 2023, chronic absence in Connecticut overall decreased to 21.0 percent compared with 23.7 percent at the end of the 2022 school year. The state saw reductions in absenteeism in every high-need population—English learners, students with disabilities, students eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and students experiencing homelessness (figure 3).
Even so, the overall rate of chronic absence remains persistently high because the rate among students outside the high-need groups is more than double that recorded before the pandemic. Additionally, while attendance is improving in most grades, chronic absence remains stubbornly high in the early grades, especially kindergarten (figure 4).

**Recommendations**

State boards of education are especially well positioned to ensure that their SEA takes a strategic approach to chronic absence. In Attendance Works’ third annual review of state attendance policy and practice, “Monitoring Data Matters More than Ever,” we encourage states to do the following:

- invest in accurate, timely, actionable data by offering a consistent definition of what constitutes a day of attendance; making sure data are disaggregated by grade as well as district, school, and student population; and promoting publication of timely state data and real-time data dashboards for districts;
- shift from a punitive response to absences to a supportive, solution-oriented approach that begins with prevention and early intervention;
- leverage the inclusion of chronic absence as an accountability metric (as is the case in the majority of Every Student Succeeds Act state plans) to expand availability of high-quality technical assistance to help districts take a tiered approach to improving attendance and using evidence-based strategies;
- use chronic absence data to inform the allocation of resources;
- double down on a cross-departmental approach; and

*Calculations are based only on in-person school days until mid-March 2020.
**Calculations include both in-person and remote days.
Use data to identify and learn from the state's bright spots.

Attendance Works also offers states a self-assessment tool to identify the most urgent gaps. Ideally, state board members will work with SEA staff to create a shared vision for moving forward.


7 Hedy Change is the founder and executive director of Attendance Works.
Understanding Who Is Missing and Why

During the shift to online learning in 2020, the disruption to students and families was nearly universal, but the causes—and effects—varied. It is now indisputable that there was a stretch of time when a shocking number of students did not attend school regularly, or at all. The work of the intervening years has been largely twofold: ensure that students reengage with learning and help them to get back on track with their academic progress.

Some kids who had disengaged from their schools came back as soon as the doors reopened. Others needed a bit more support to reengage, perhaps a few phone calls or a home visit from a school social worker. Still other students permanently transitioned to different learning environments—private schools or home schooling. But the evidence, as well as

The pandemic only magnified chronic absence among students with the greatest needs and made the problem harder to ignore.

Hailly T.N. Korman
Patterns had simply gone undetected, which meant individual cases were treated as unremarkable exceptions.

common sense, underscores the possibility that some students are still fully disconnected from learning. What can state boards of education do to support these students?

At first glance, this may seem like a frustrating new problem for schools and communities, but in truth it is a very old one, with familiar names like “truancy,” “chronic absenteeism,” “high mobility,” “transiency,” and “dropping out.” While COVID’s school closures have undoubtedly accelerated, expanded, and deepened these challenges, they remain fundamentally the same as ever. Fifteen, ten, or even five years ago, there seemed to be general acceptance that some small number of kids would just stop showing up to school—either to a specific school where they had been attending or anywhere at all. Today, the pandemic presents a renewed opportunity to rethink how to reach missing students and to reenergize efforts that have long gone neglected and underresourced.

Comprehensive data are hard to come by, but existing data from the U.S. Department of Education suggest that this new wave of school disengagement is, like its predecessors, not evenly distributed. It is reasonable to conclude that those students, families, and communities who were most likely to experience the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic are also most likely to still be experiencing these consequences. For a family in which the caregivers were classified as “essential workers,” for example, young people in the home were probably experiencing greater pressures to provide childcare for younger siblings, making it difficult for them to engage with their own learning. Some households lost caregivers to COVID, pushing young people into the workforce as primary wage earners for their families. Still others simply fell so far behind that returning to a high school setting may have seemed impractical.

Regardless of the cause, the consequences of an incomplete education are both significant and shared: A 2009 study found that young people who did not complete high school struggled to participate fully in the labor market, had higher rates of incarceration, and were far more likely to live in poverty. In addition to the individual human costs for each young person, “[t]he average high school dropout will cost taxpayers over $292,000 in lower tax revenues, higher cash and in-kind transfer costs, and imposed incarceration costs relative to an average high school graduate.”

The most important questions for state board members to ask are, Who is missing? and Why? Finding the answers is the first step to understanding the nature of unmet needs in each state, district, and school so that solutions are responsive. Here are four such efforts:

- In Yakima, Washington, local leaders have convened a citywide task force to do case management and systems improvement.
- In El Dorado County, California, a county commission established to improve coordination and communication for youth and families is being deployed to understand and address the underlying causes of disengagement.
- As the number of truancy petitions have soared, leaders in Nashville, Tennessee, are developing an innovative school design informed by youth in contact with the courts.
- The Utah State Board of Education directly oversees the delivery of Check & Connect mentoring, an evidence-based program for young people receiving services through the state’s Youth in Care programs.

Notably, these programs operated at different levels of education leadership, from the state board down to local partnerships between educators and community-based organizations. But each offers different opportunities for state board support.

Analyzing Data

The Yakima, Washington, school district first analyzed their attendance data during the pandemic but then looked back to data long before 2020. While school closures had expanded and accelerated truancy and attendance challenges for their most vulnerable students during COVID, the underlying phenomenon of student disengagement was not new. The patterns had simply gone undetected, which meant that individual cases were treated as unremarkable exceptions, not symptoms of a larger problem. For years, these students had slipped from school rosters and drifted into unsafe environments and behaviors that ultimately led to a high rate of dependence on long-term care in their communities.

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Leaders had to think holistically about the causes of truancy and chronic absenteeism in order to create systemic solutions.


tackling Truancy

The Nashville-Davidson County Juvenile Court leads the Metro Student Attendance Center (MSAC), a specialty court to which truancy petitions are referred. Partnering with the local school district to reduce truancy, improve attendance, and eliminate loitering during school hours, the court intervenes when students miss school and have not responded to school-based interventions.

The court saw an uptick in truancy petitions during the 2022–23 school year. In response, leaders had to think holistically about the causes of truancy and chronic absenteeism in order to create systemic solutions. For example, when a new third grade retention law threatened to retain the 60 percent of Tennessee third grade students who had not achieved proficiency on the state reading test, the district created a summer learning program, Promising Scholars. It provides educational opportunities each summer for students who choose to attend or are mandated to do so if they are at risk of retention. The program also provides high-dosage tutoring in reading for elementary students.

Another innovation has been to tap students who have involved in the justice system and those who have been disengaged from school to join an emerging effort to design a school for them. This school would be an addition to the city’s current education ecosystem, in which...
existing alternative schools provide short-term rather than stable, long-term education options.

Connecting with Mentors

The Utah State Board of Education directly manages education programs for young people in the state who are eligible for youth in care/custody programming. The board provides mentoring through an evidence-based program called Check & Connect. Local education agencies (LEAs) apply to the state board for funding for the mentoring services. The state board is also responsible for training mentors, who are in place in 26 LEAs serving 1,500 students statewide. Working with the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, the state board identifies youth needing mentors and supports mentors with technical assistance, professional learning, and program monitoring.

A longstanding feature of Utah’s service model, the Check & Connect mentors helped mitigate the effects of pandemic school closures on youth in care. They helped students transition to home learning, taking them Chromebooks and other school supplies and conducting “porch to car” visits to stay engaged with students and families while maintaining safe social distancing.

State Support

In staving off chronic absence and increasing engagement, each state, district, and community has to respond to its own needs—there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Nonetheless, these examples highlight three common—and interdependent—elements of promising approaches for state boards to consider: invest in data systems, build and support relationships, and match resources to actual needs. State boards play a crucial role in supporting these approaches by advocating for allocation of resources, incentivizing targeted programming, and sharing highlights of promising approaches across districts.

- Invest in Data Systems. A precondition for understanding the scope and scale of any community’s ongoing challenges with student disengagement is high-quality, timely data that reveal patterns.

- Build and Support Relationships. The essential point of connection between a disengaged young person and their school will always be a trusted person—an adult who is able to share information with the student and help solve problems. Statewide support for mentoring can help build durable system capacity for relationship building.

- Match Resources to Actual Needs. As leaders gather information and refine their approaches, resources can be adjusted to match actual needs that are interfering with school reengagement.

As students disengaged, education leaders have long accepted that there would be a certain amount of attrition in some schools—and a lot in others. School closures during the pandemic magnified student disengagement and laid bare the underlying challenges. It has become harder to look away. Addressing student disengagement today will take more than new tools or programs; it requires a fresh look at old challenges.

The pandemic magnified student disengagement and laid bare the underlying challenges. It has become harder to look away.

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3 The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that for every four COVID deaths, one U.S. child loses a parent or caregiver. In addition, there are disparities by race, ethnicity, and geography, with children of racial and ethnic minorities making up 65 percent of those who lost a primary caregiver. Susan D. Hillis et al., “COVID-19: Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States,” Pediatrics 148, no. 6 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-053760.


5 The examples cited here include work supported by Bellwether through its contract- and grant-funded relationships. Shelby Lockheart (Yakima, Washington), Jennifer Wade (Nashville, Tennessee), Julia Armstrong (Utah), Amanda Charlesworth (Utah), Kathi Gurrero (El Dorado, California), and Ed Manansala (El Dorado, California) contributed details about their efforts via personal communication with the author.
How State Leaders Can Stand Up for the COVID Generation of High Schoolers

With billions of dollars in lost economic activity and untold squandered human potential, COVID-19 threatens to leave an enduring legacy.\(^1\) Especially at risk are students who have been least visible in the discourse about learning recovery and have the least amount of time to catch up: those currently enrolled in high school.

By one measure in an NWEA study, students who finished grade 8 during the 2022–23 school year faced a steeper climb to academic recovery than younger students. They would need an additional 7.4 months of learning in reading and 9.1 months in math to return to pre-pandemic achievement levels.\(^2\) That is a daunting amount of ground to make up in four years of high school, especially since the study found that older students had lost ground between fall 2022 and spring 2023.

By another measure—the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)’s study of long-term trends—the pandemic and school closures wiped out decades of educational improvement among 13-year-olds. Even more concerning: The gaps between the highest- and lowest-scoring students appear to have widened, especially in math.\(^3\)

An analysis by researchers at Stanford and Harvard University found the real impact varied depending on who students were and where they lived. Those who

Families need better data on students’ academic progress; students need meaningful learning experiences and better information on postsecondary options.

Travis Pillow and Robin Lake
There is a dearth of clear, actionable data about which high schools are equipping students for success after graduation.

Highlight Student Progress and Mastery

The national conversations about learning loss and tutoring have focused disproportionately on younger students. In 2022, NAEP reported historic learning losses in fourth and eighth graders. Researchers tracking pandemic recovery more closely relied on assessments like MAP and iReady. Schools and districts use these assessments multiple times during the school year to monitor their students’ progress and help prepare for state assessments in the spring. As a result, these assessments have yielded more frequent snapshots of pandemic recovery than state assessment systems typically allow. Reports based on these interim assessments have also focused heavily on grades 3 through 8. This emphasis on elementary and middle school results is enshrined in federal policy, which requires public schools to test students annually in elementary and middle school, but just once in high school.

With just a single year of high school results, there is a dearth of clear, actionable data about which high schools are equipping students for success after graduation and how these students are recovering from the pandemic. The most widely cited measure of high school success—graduation rates—fluctuated dramatically during the pandemic as states loosened requirements. For example, the share of ninth graders in the District of Columbia who were projected to graduate high school jumped by six percentage points during the pandemic. But the share expected to complete postsecondary education within six years fell by the same amount.

A national survey of rising and actual high school seniors conducted by ACT found that nearly half of all students—and even larger proportions of low-income students—had reconsidered some aspect of their college or career plans during the pandemic years. Others are graduating with gaps in their learning that will threaten their progress in college. However, as we compiled data for our forthcoming State of the American Student 2023 report, we discovered a lack of systematic data about how cohorts of students most affected by the pandemic are faring after high school graduation.

The first step to solving this problem is to shine a light on it. Some states, like Indiana and Louisiana, have set up transparent dashboards that report students’ progress throughout their educational journey—from third grade reading scores to college readiness to employment. Indiana also reports on sustained employment and median earnings for graduates who remain in-state, which suggests consistent reporting on outcomes for students who cross state lines after graduation remains a data gap even for states that have made strides toward tracking longer-term outcomes.

Students and families deserve clear information that can help them decide which college and career training programs are effective. State leaders need actionable insights into how students fare after they leave high school so they can design more effective support systems. Such systems should include meaningful measures of how well-prepared high school students are for life after graduation, such as Indiana’s reports on sustained employment and median earnings.
on college and career readiness and the percentage of students earning meaningful credentials recognized by colleges and employers.

The public should be able to get a more nuanced picture of the complexity of students’ needs. For example, rather than reporting outcomes for students with disabilities as a single category, those with autism and those with hearing impairments should be disaggregated, so leaders can see which of these students are receiving adequate support in planning for postsecondary transitions, as is required by federal law, and which of these students are enrolling in college and participating in dual enrollment and career training.

Helpfully, the U.S. Education Department’s Institute for Education Sciences has launched a new initiative to help states develop new and better longitudinal data systems. The time is ripe to invest in systems that link student records across high school, college, and tax and census information so policymakers have as much visibility into how students fare after leaving school as they do while they are enrolled.

Gathering and reporting data may not be enough to drive action. Schools and districts are likely to need help making sense of what the data show. States can help districts connect with universities and nonprofit researchers who can help interpret the data their improved systems collect.

Provide Actionable Information to Families

Reporting results for students and subgroups is not enough. Every parent deserves an honest accounting of how the pandemic affected their child’s learning and what they can do to recover. Right now, an honesty gap is hampering pandemic recovery.

The majority of parents surveyed by Pew Research Center in September 2022 predicted that the pandemic’s impact on their children’s learning would only be temporary.¹⁰ A survey by the advocacy group Learning Heroes found that nine in ten parents believe their child is performing at or above grade level in school.¹¹ The same survey found that nine in ten parents in Washington, DC, say their children are prepared to succeed in college, while SAT scores say just two in ten students in the District are college ready.¹²

Given this disconnect between parent beliefs and performance data, it is no wonder that parents also reported limited interest in tutoring and afterschool and summer programming to help their children catch up.¹³ For too long, the conversation about accountability in public education has focused on holding schools accountable for outcomes and neglected giving parents and teachers actionable information about where students stand and what can help them improve.

Some states are creating tools to close the honesty gap. Virginia is building a dashboard designed to help parents see where their students stand and identify areas they can target with tutoring or interventions. Building such tools is not just essential for pandemic recovery. It can also upend the negative politics around school accountability, where educators often feel blamed. Assessments and rating systems that provide useful information to parents and educators will be more likely to win their long-term support.

Provide Flexible Support

Surveys also point to a growing skepticism of American students and parents about the value of a four-year college degree.¹⁴ For the typical student, a four-year college diploma has a lifetime value that far exceeds its cost: an estimated $1.2 million on average.¹⁵ But the value of a specific degree for a specific student depends on their choice of major and the institution they attend.¹⁶

And the reality is that students must navigate an opaque system built on false assumptions with fragmented support and limited information. Missteps can leave them saddled with debt that follows them for life. For example, a study of Chicago Public Schools graduates found it is more common for a student to transfer from a four-year to a two-year institution, even though pathways are typically designed around the opposite assumption.¹⁷

The students frequently cited inconsistent, impersonal advising from offices designed to help them navigate the system. Amayrani, a first-generation college student, described an experience that was all too typical: “It was like when you go to a store, you take a ticket, that’s really pretty much how they go, you get a different person each time.”¹⁸

Students should have clear information on the effectiveness and long-term economic value of college.”
of different college and career pathways. They should have mentors and advisors who get to know them and help them make informed decisions about where to attend, what financial aid is available, and how their choice of education or career options might affect their future earnings. And states should look for financially sustainable ways to expand upon what states like Connecticut did during the pandemic and offer scholarships designed to fill gaps in students’ existing financial aid.

Build the System Every Student Deserves

The typical high school experience is not working for far too many students. Students report feeling less engaged with their education as they progress from middle to high school.19 However, making high school more relevant—and helping students explore college and career possibilities while earning meaningful credentials—appears to be one of the few true opportunities for fruitful bipartisanship in an education policy landscape crippled by polarized politics. In our 2023 State of the American Student report, Jared Polis, Colorado’s Democratic governor, and Aimee Guidera, Virginia’s education secretary appointed by Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin, highlight steps their states are taking to blur the lines between high school, college, and career preparation.20 They are ensuring that every student graduates with meaningful college or workforce credentials.

State boards of education may have limited authority to force high schools, higher education institutions, and workforce training providers to create that system. But they are uniquely positioned to shine a light on the needs of the COVID generation and the possibility of a better future for all young people.

2Karyn Lewis and Megan Kuhfeld, “Education’s Long COVID: 2022–23 Achievement Data Reveal Stalled Progress toward Pandemic Recovery,” figure 3 (NWEA, July 2023). NWEA makes one of the most widely used assessments for monitoring academic progress.
5Complete College America, “Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere” (Indianapolis, April 2012).
15Anthony P. Carnevale, Ban Cheah, and Emma Wenzinger, “The College Payoff: More Education Doesn’t Always Mean More Earnings” (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, McCourt School of Public Policy, Center on Education and the Workforce, 2021).
16Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce, “Ranking ROI of 4,500 US Colleges and Universities,” https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/collegeroi/.
18University of Chicago, To&Through Project, “Amayrani’s Story of Navigating the Postsecondary Maze,” Medium, December 5, 2021.
Students who cannot connect their learning in school with their career aspirations are at higher risk of disengaging academically and socially, and disengagement and boredom are harbingers of dropping out of high school altogether. Particularly in more urban, economically disadvantaged communities, there still are many traditional, comprehensive schools that are labeled “dropout factories” because more than half their students stop attending and fail to graduate. In many of these urban settings, career academies have emerged as a prominent reform to increase student engagement.

Embedded in high schools across the nation, career academies are situated in a variety of settings, including comprehensive and magnet schools as well as career centers. An estimated 8,000-plus are in existence, serving over one million students.1

Initially formed to keep students from dropping out by preparing them to enter the workforce right out of high school, career academies have now extended their mission to preparing students to be both college and career ready. The academies’ goal is to enhance students’ engagement in school and improve their performance while exposing them to postsecondary education and work options.

### Ingredients of Career Academies

Key components of these academies are their small learning communities, integrated college-preparatory and career-themed curricula, and partnerships with

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Edward C. Fletcher Jr.
Project-based activities that apply core academic content are central to the curricula.

In NAF academies, teachers receive instructional supports and technical assistance in using industry-validated curricula. With this structured support, teachers are able to form deep relationships with students while they make connections between their teaching practice and real-world applications.

Integrated and Industry-Validated Curricula. The integrated curriculum and instruction component promotes career and academic learning around a theme—business and finance, engineering, health sciences, hospitality and tourism, information technology. Project-based activities that apply core academic content are central to the curricula, which are developed with business and industry leaders within the respective fields of study. Because of the real-world nature of the content, students find relevancy and meaning in what they are learning. They become more engaged.

Teachers that integrate curriculum are connecting skills, themes, concepts, and topics across disciplines and between academic and technical content. They connect overarching theories and big ideas. There is some evidence that this approach leads to better academic outcomes as well. In one study of the integration of math in career and technical (CTE) education courses, a group of CTE teachers from five career areas worked with math teachers to design math-enhanced CTE lessons. There were math and CTE teachers in a control group as well. After 20 hours of math-enhanced instruction, CTE students in the experimental group scored significantly higher on two of three math assessments.

Work-Based Learning. Career academies emphasize learning in specific occupational contexts to enhance the relevance of student experiences. When done well, students engage in progressive work-based learning experiences from 9th through 12th grades that are developmentally and age appropriate. Under the NAF model, work-based learning includes career awareness and exploration in 9th (e.g., field trips) and 10th (e.g., job shadowing) grades and experiential opportunities (e.g., industry certifications, paid internships) in 11th and 12th grades. Thus work-based learning enables students to apply what they know to real-world settings while exposing them to and preparing them for career paths they choose. Students
Few states are systematically monitoring whether career academies are indeed fulfilling Perkins V obligations to prepare students for college and careers.

**Implications for State Boards**

The central federal legislature on CTE, known in its current authorization as Perkins V, advances ambitious goals for CTE programs. According to Perkins V, a program of study is “a coordinated sequence of academic and technical content at the secondary and postsecondary level.” However, few states are systematically monitoring whether career academies—a reform initiative that uses a program of study model—are indeed fulfilling Perkins V obligations to prepare students for college and careers.

Given the demonstrated benefits learners gain in small learning communities with integrated curricula, work-based learning, and advisory board engagement, it is imperative that state boards of education examine, detail, and clarify the language, expectations, and provisions of Perkins V to specify which types of these academy activities schools should adopt. More specifically, state boards could do the following:

- advocate for funding and incentives for developing career academies;
- emphasize the need for advisory boards that are representative of the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students they serve;
- require the implementation of work-based learning in high schools, where students benefit from career awareness, exploration, and experience in college and career pathways of their choosing;
- develop a data collection system that tracks the work-based learning activities that students participate in high schools across their states. Such systems should also track individual student participation to uncover potential inequities in participation and pay by career theme and individual differences (e.g., ethnic and racial background, gender, socioeconomic status). The system should also report that these experiences, particularly internships, are the most memorable learning experiences of their K-12 years.

**Advisory Board Engagement.** Because they communicate beliefs and values and model positive behaviors, adults on advisory boards are an integral part of NAF academies. An advisory board comprises a diverse network of business and industry representatives, postsecondary institutions, parents, alumni, students, and community members. The board provides curriculum support, mentoring, guest speakers, field trips, job shadowing, internships, and fundraising for scholarships and student activities and organizations. It leverages a community’s social capital to promote work-based learning and advance the goals of the academy more generally. Academy students benefit from increased engagement with adults who serve as role models in their desired fields.

**Student Outcomes**

But do these career academies deliver? Colleagues and I have studied the NAF career academies in particular and find that the model is a successful strategy to build student engagement and facilitate career pursuits. For example, my colleagues and I found higher levels of emotional engagement in academy students compared with a demographically matched group of students from a traditional comprehensive high school in the same district.

In another study, Black students reported that their participation in career academies was the most meaningful aspect of their schooling and that the academy afforded them an opportunity to gain a greater sense of community and belonging, acquire hands-on training, and explore their academic and career interests.

In addition, participation in career academies increases student engagement, attendance, graduation rates, academic achievement, and long-term employment earnings.

NAF academies also helped Black boys form engineering identities through their exposure in the academy to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and STEM role models and mentors, particularly Black male STEM professionals. These professionals were sources of inspiration, cultural connection, and validation of students’ ability to succeed in STEM college and career pathways. My colleagues and I also found that the intersectional identities of ethnicity/race and gender of these mentors contributed to Black males students’ STEM identity formation and development. The mentors engaged Black male students in transparent, candid discussions and shared their experiences of navigating STEM college and workplace environments.

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A 2019 study of the impact of ACES on learning found that children’s risk of poor attendance, behavior issues, and failure to reach grade level in math, reading, and writing increases as the number of ACES they experience increases. These results are statistically significant even when accounting for gender, race, and levels of school poverty. The researchers suggest that students with many ACEs may be at risk for academic or behavioral issues without officially meeting the diagnostic standards for receiving special education services or interventions.

Creating Supportive Classrooms

We have parsed trauma-informed education practices into six primary areas: identifying and assessing trauma, creating safe and predictable learning environments, cultural responsiveness, positive behavior management, positive relationship building, and social-emotional learning. In a systematic review of state teacher preparation standards from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., we found only five states that require preservice teachers to receive training in these areas prior to certification, indicating that many teachers are likely unprepared to use trauma-informed practices to support children.

Yet there is some evidence that student outcomes improve when teachers apply trauma-informed practices. In a 2021 study, teachers who implemented and co-designed a model to improve student self-regulation reported increased student participation and greater positive relationship building. The teachers also reported that modeling emotional regulation increased both teacher and student attention to their personal needs.

In a study of the program Healthy
Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools, teachers were surveyed about their perceptions of student engagement after its implementation. Researchers found that the training teachers received as part of the program increased their understanding of trauma and the use of trauma-sensitive practices. It also significantly improved students’ ability to learn, attendance rates, and focus, and it decreased the school’s overall number of disciplinary office referrals, out-of-school suspensions, and incidents of physical aggression.

A third study evaluated a program in which mental health consultants provided elementary school teachers in rural Appalachia with professional development on implementing trauma-informed practices and interventions to address student behavior. Participating teachers reported that they felt more competent and confident using positive, compassionate strategies to address challenging classroom behavior rather than punitive disciplinary practices. The teachers also reported that students exhibited increased resilience and improved classroom behavior.

Teachers want this training. We solicited their views of trauma-informed practices in our 2021 study and found them overwhelmingly supportive. One responded:

“I feel trauma-informed supports have had a net positive impact on my job satisfaction. Time to accomplish what I need to on a day-to-day basis is limited, so adding trauma-informed professional development can add some stress. However, it has allowed me to better understand and connect with my students, which has improved my relationships and positively impacted classroom management. It also taught me to reconsider what is most important when it comes to teaching content, and I have significantly altered my practice and grading policies to be more supportive for students who might carry trauma with them. Taking time to connect with my students, evaluating what is important, and adjusting policies to support all students has reduced more stress than a few extra minutes of professional development have caused.”

Recommendations

To equip educators to help students who have experienced trauma, state boards should pursue a policy agenda aligned to the National Traumatic Stress Network’s Framework for a Trauma-Informed School. We arrange these policies in tiers, ranging from those that support universal integration of trauma-informed practices to interventions for students most in need (figure 1).

Amending Effective Teaching Standards. We recommend that state boards update their effective teaching standards for in-service teachers to include trauma-informed practices. For example, in Massachusetts, the board could update Standard II: Teaching All Students, Section B: Learning Environment of the Standards of Effective Teaching to include, “Utilizes trauma-informed practices that recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in children and respond to the needs of such children with appropriate social, emotional, and behavioral learning interventions.”

While the decision to add standards for teaching should not be taken lightly, teachers are already being evaluated on skills in classroom management, cultural responsiveness, and social-emotional learning that are integral to trauma-informed practice. Therefore, this new standard would ask teachers to explicitly apply the strong classroom practices they already use to support children who have experienced trauma.

Amending Preservice Teacher Preparation Standards. To ensure that preservice teachers are trained in trauma-informed practices as well, state boards should also update teacher preparation standards. To align preservice training with in-service practice, these standards should include the same criteria as effective teaching standards. After it adopts new standards, state boards should direct their education departments to create guidelines for how educator preparation programs can embed trauma-informed practices in their coursework. Rather than requiring the programs to add courses, guidelines should detail ways in which trauma-informed practices can be integrated into existing coursework.

Creating an Endorsement. We recommend that state boards create a teacher licensure endorsement for trauma-informed practices. It would require demonstration of subject-matter knowledge through completion of an approved training program or course. Pennsylvania has a social, emotional, and behavioral wellness endorsement that includes social-emotional learning, identification of ACES, behavioral

State boards ought to review standards for school social workers to ensure they include trauma-informed practices specific to school settings.
Directing Funding for Professional Development and No-Cost Endorsement Pathways. State boards can also urge their education agencies to allocate state funding to districts for meaningful professional development on trauma-informed practices. Myriad organizations, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Youth Mental Health First Aid, and Trauma Sensitive Schools Project, train educators and school leaders on trauma-informed practices and supporting student mental health. Additionally, federal or state funding should support teachers who would like to earn an endorsement in this area.

Conclusion

We urge state boards to take action to ensure that educators are trained in trauma-informed practices. Using these practices, teachers can promote student mental health and create safe spaces for students who have experienced trauma to learn and grow socially, emotionally, and...
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6CSDE, “Catalog of Trauancy Intervention Models” (March 2018).


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academically. The policy intervention model we propose will ensure that preservice educators are trained before they enter the classroom and help in-service teachers gain new professional knowledge.


3CDC, ABES.


8Joyce Dorado et al., “Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS): A Whole-School, Multi-Level, Prevention and Intervention Program for Creating Trauma-Informed, Safe and Supportive Schools,” School Mental Health 8, no. 1 (2016): 163–76.


13Shamblin, Graham, and Bianco, “Creating Trauma-Informed Schools for Rural Appalachia.”

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track the community members who participate in the work-based learning experiences and the quality of the experiences through reflection forms, surveys, and evaluative rubrics so state leaders can readily evaluate the academic, employability, and technical skills students are gaining.


3Data came from a survey of students designed to gauge their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. In this survey, emotional engagement comprises a sense of belonging and safety and beliefs that students can be themselves and accepted for it. Edward C. Fletcher Jr. et al., “Examining the Engagement of Career Academy and Comprehensive High School Students in the United States,” The Journal of Educational Research 113, no. 4 (2020).


7Fletcher et al., “Equity Perspectives of School Stakeholders.”
“Above all, we will apply a lens of equity and excellence to everything we do so that our focus and that of our member boards remains fixed on ensuring that all students get the resources they need to succeed.”

—“Our Members, Our Mission: A Strategic Plan for the National Association of State Boards of Education” (Fall 2018)

Mission Statement

NASBE develops, supports, and empowers citizen leaders on state boards of education to strengthen public education systems so students of all backgrounds and circumstances are prepared to succeed in school, work, and life.

Core Values

We believe in equity and excellence:
We believe that students of all races, genders, and circumstances deserve the supports they need to thrive in school.

We believe all students can learn at high levels and must have the opportunity to do so through state policies that address their diverse learning needs.

We prioritize state leadership of public education: We believe that state boards of education, in partnership with chief state school officers, governors, and legislatures, are best positioned to craft, promote, and oversee state education policies.

We empower citizen leaders: We build the capacity of state board members to question, convene, and act boldly with and for students, educators, and families.

We elevate evidence in policymaking: We ground our resources, tools, and services in the strongest evidence available and help our members make informed decisions in the best interest of students.

We build community: We facilitate productive dialogue and nonpartisan exchange among members with diverse perspectives, creating lasting channels for the sharing of evidence-based strategies and solutions.

We collaborate: We promote respectful collaboration, both among our members and between our members and the broader education community.
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