Back to school, but not caught up.

After school reopenings, administrators eager to tackle learning loss continue to face challenges

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NOVEMBER 2022

AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICT PANEL

CRPE REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Overview

For almost two years, the Center on Reinventing Public Education has followed five public charter and traditional school districts in a variety of urban and suburban settings to understand the academic, social and political challenges posed by the pandemic and to chronicle what local education systems are doing to address those challenges. The school systems range in size from enrolling fewer than 6,000 students to more than 40,000 students; all of them predominantly serve students of color. Beginning in winter 2021, we conducted three waves of semi-structured interviews with the systems' superintendents, chief academic officers, human resource directors, and other central office personnel.

This is our third report on the topic, and it draws from interviews conducted with approximately 25 school system leaders and high-level administrators between May and July 2022.

In spring 2021, as children began to return to school following the Covid-19 shutdowns, district leaders were determined to help them make up for lost time. As we reported then, school district leaders intended to pursue a strategy of academic acceleration–teaching all students at grade level and providing targeted help for those who had missed necessary information and skills. No one would be assigned to dead-end remedial programs. Every student would get personal attention. Teachers would collaborate: some would offer grade-level instruction, and others would supplement that instruction and offer tutoring as needed.

Our second report, "Whack-A-Mole: School Systems Respond to Disrupted Learning in 2021," showed districts were struggling to execute acceleration strategies in light of disruptions caused by health issues and politics, inconsistent student and teacher attendance, and lack of good data on students' needs. District leaders said they were committed to implementing acceleration strategies but were forced to pivot almost daily to deal with crises.

Our latest interviews conducted in spring 2022 showed that district leaders, while still motivated by concerns over learning losses, were still trying to adequately staff classrooms, maintain student attendance, and manage political conflicts. They had extended their timelines for implementing new instructional strategies, and in some cases, they pared down their ambitious goals. By the end of the 2021-2022 school year, districts had not implemented the acceleration strategies they had embraced in spring 2021.

This project is part of the American School District Panel, a research partnership between the RAND Corporation and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba, to help improve outcomes for students throughout the United States.

Summary

Since instruction resumed after the Covid-19 pandemic-induced shutdowns, districts have tried to help students regain lost ground. However, school district leaders report that their work has been much harder than they had anticipated. The pandemic and its aftermath continue to disrupt plans, and staffing shortages, capacity deficits, and staff burnout remain problems in many of the sites we surveyed. But even as they cope with daily crises, system leaders remain determined to pursue new initiatives to improve academic instruction and promote student learning. Only time will tell if the new plans will ensure that all students who have fallen behind can catch up, or if districts will have to revisit their earlier plans to dig more deeply into academic acceleration.

The main findings of our third American School District Panel report include:

- Student absences and staff shortages have sidelined the adoption of academic acceleration strategies.
- Districts are working hard to rebuild teacher capacity and collect better data.
- Some districts are turning back to familiar classroom instruction habits developed before the pandemic, but others are trying different types of strategies beyond learning acceleration to address learning losses.
- The pandemic has changed district priorities, and it has reshaped the work of superintendents and senior administrators.

Districts haven't given up on restoring lost learning or improving classroom instruction. But to help students who spent months out of school, they're applying high-dosage tutoring, project-based learning and career-infused education in a piecemeal fashion, rather than pursuing academic acceleration as a comprehensive approach.

District struggles have sidelined attempts to accelerate learning

In our first set of interviews 14 months ago, district leadership teams had been optimistic about their plans for learning acceleration. Learning acceleration strategies include teachers moving forward with grade-level content, while also providing catch-up support for students who missed material. This is different from remedial education, in which students generally repeat entire sections of material below grade level to ensure comprehension. In the most recent spring 2022 interviews, however, district leaders expressed more sobering views about the difficult road ahead to accelerate learning.

"I think there were some of us, myself included, who thought this year was going to be back to normal, whatever that is, but we were quickly reminded that actually it's probably the hardest year yet," one senior leader put it.

These sentiments were echoed in comments across districts in our study. As a result, the acceleration strategy leaders emphasized as being key to helping students recover in spring 2021 has not been implemented at scale in any of the districts.

Noted one superintendent, "[Last summer] we were talking about [acceleration and] what we believe as an organization, but then when [some teachers] got to it in October, they're like, I don't know if I believe in this. And that's hard. [Acceleration] presupposes that you have teacher supports, good curriculum and resources and materials, and some good interventions. And we could check some of those boxes on some days and some days we would check all three, but that is hard to do."

More specifically, inconsistent student and teacher attendance, chronic staffing vacancies, diminished organizational capacity, and struggles with data undercut the "acceleration" assumption that teachers would be able to track kids' learning closely and prescribe interventions immediately as needs arose.

Inconsistent attendance for students and teachers

Early in the 2021-22 school year, student attendance had been weak enough in some districts to cause fears of mass course failure in city high schools. Even though most students resumed normal school attendance, problems remained, particularly in large urban districts.

One district leader noted, "The kids that come regularly are catching up pretty quick... I think in the schools where both teacher attendance and student attendance were good, we saw decent progress."

The main hurdle: in almost half the districts we studied, student and teacher attendance remained poor all year.

Explained one leader in a large urban district that faced enrollment challenges, "We lost kids. Like, they just never came back." Drops in enrollment were difficult to diagnose because nobody

knew where the students went, the district official said. "We spent a lot of this year trying to find them, because we're not sure if they moved out of the district." The leader suggested prolonged remote operations might have led families to look elsewhere for new schools, often by moving out of the district.

Even when students remained enrolled, community violence and other out-of-school stressors often discouraged students from attending. Noted one official in a district where a majority of the students were labeled chronically absent, "We've lost so many kids to violence this year. And there's a lot going on in the neighborhoods that I think prevents kids from coming in." This official also noted that labor market opportunities also pulled some kids out of school. "We have three new distribution centers that just opened [that] were desperate for people to work. The kids would turn 18, they'd get a job, they'd start working an overnight shift and then stop coming to school. We couldn't drag 'em back in because they were making $20 an hour and to an 18-year-old that's big bucks!" The official noted that graduation rates were also demonstrably lower in the high schools that were geographically closest to those distribution centers.

Chronic teacher absences also hamstrung a majority of the districts we examined. Noted one senior leader:

> *"I go to bed every night looking at a report about staffing. I wake up every morning looking at a report about staffing, trying to make a determination as to what schools we push [substitutes] into, what schools can handle it on their own, what schools should we close [temporarily in light of staffing problems]. But we wrestle with that because kids need to come to school. Parents need to come to work. So if we don't [temporarily] close, what would it look like for the day?"*

The teaching absences were exacerbated by the difficulty faced by most school districts in finding temporary hires to step in. Added another district leader:

> *"You didn't have the flexibility of substitutes. You didn't have people that were available. We still had a lot of people in the fall who were concerned about working in a school and were opting out...They didn't need to work and so they didn't want to work. And it got better as we got through the school year, but you always have more absences at the end of the school year."*

While not all districts struggled so vividly with absenteeism, in two of the districts we interviewed the number of absent teachers was quite high–over 250 individuals daily, or one in six of all teachers in one medium-sized district. That same school district (like others in our study) reported difficulty finding substitute teachers, reporting a 61% fill rate, meaning that on the worst days, this district could have over 90 classrooms without a substitute.

Unfilled staff vacancies

Problems with staffing went beyond absenteeism. Though districts had federal pandemic relief money under the Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Fund, virtually all struggled to

recruit sufficient staff. Even those that offered sizable signing bonuses had trouble attracting people in a tight labor market. As a result, leaders in every district mentioned the challenge of staff vacancies.

Noted one human resources official, "Two, three years ago, we would not have as many vacancies to fill for next year, bottom line. And that's not a reflection on anything other than the environment that we're living in and the times that we're living in." That environment included a national trend in which enrollment in colleges of education was dropping. As the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education reports, the number of students enrolling in teacher education programs dropped by nearly a third between 2007 and 2017-18. Moreover, nearly one in five graduate teaching programs and one in 10 undergraduate programs reported significantly lower enrollment in 2020-21.

These findings echo other reports that raise concerns about a crisis in the teacher workforce. Human resource officials noted several factors contributed to staffing challenges: Covid-related drops in teacher retention (as some teachers opted not to return to the classroom); increased teacher mobility tied to the "poaching" of talent from one district to another (exacerbated by the use of signing bonuses); and longer-term labor market trends that preceded the pandemic.

Teacher shortages hit particularly hard in districts that based their learning recovery plans on hiring more personnel. Explained the talent director in one large urban system:

> *"We gotta talk about our own self-inflicted wounds. To expand offerings for our students for art, music, and phys ed, we opened a significant number of positions at the beginning of the year. Those positions that we didn't fill caused a constant staffing issue."*

Yet even districts with lower staffing aspirations struggled with staffing. One superintendent noted that, during the 2021-22 school year, "we literally, absolutely, had positions [that] we never filled."

Staffing challenges went beyond the teaching pool. One superintendent noted that human resources and technology departments in central offices were particularly hard to staff since individuals qualified for those jobs had many private-sector alternatives, typically with higher salaries and greater flexibility. These vacancies compounded teaching shortages because of their critical role in recruiting and hiring new talent. Noted a human resources director in a third district, "We had more midyear resignations than we've had before...there's nothing worse. If you can't find them during the normal times, it's impossible to find them in the off times."

While some districts did manage to reduce teacher attrition (e.g., through midyear retention bonuses and other side perks), the absence of enough permanent personnel undermined districts' capacity to accelerate learning. As a superintendent noted, "We've known for a long time that a long-term sub or rotating subs is not ideal for consistent learning for kids."

Another superintendent emphasized how staffing challenges undermined specific interventions and blunted momentum: "[Because] we weren't fully staffed everywhere, [it was] harder to do pull-outs or small groups. We tried to do tutoring this year, [but] in the fall we couldn't find a provider that could provide capacity for all of our schools." In response to these constraints, they regrouped in January 2022 and proposed a decentralized approach, but were greeted with

pushback from school leaders, who doubted the efficacy of a scaled-back reform: "Principals were like 'I'm good'; either 'we need it for the whole school' or 'it's too much to get going.' We [hadn't] made the time to make it part of the school structure the whole year."

These teacher absences and vacancies also had ripple effects that undermined central office staff members' ability to provide training or link teachers and lagging students with individualized help.

Problems with teacher readiness and professional development

To accelerate student learning, district leaders knew that teachers needed training and practice to identify gaps in knowledge and refer students to helpful resources. Teachers also needed to be open to rethinking their instructional approaches. Many leaders worried about whether their teachers had the skills, perspective, and emotional bandwidth necessary to maintain high expectations and accelerate learning.

These concerns were particularly apparent in math, a subject for which many districts struggled to find high-quality teachers. Faced with a charge to focus on high-impact standards and armed with an advanced curriculum that demanded a great deal from teachers, one leader described teachers as struggling to do more than go through the motions:

> *"What I saw as I walked through classrooms is teachers are* reading *the script. So if you're saying, oh, are you following [the new math curriculum]? They're like, yes, I'm following it to fidelity. But they don't* know *the script. They don't know the math. They don't know why they're doing what they're doing. So when kids have problems or they come up against the wall, the teacher hasn't internalized the lesson enough to be able to guide them through it."*

Districts sought to boost teacher capacity with focused training. But in a school year when substitutes could not be found, it was difficult to release teachers from daily duties to learn and practice new skills. Moreover, central office staff, who were often forced out of their regular jobs and into schools to cover for absent educators, had too little time to plan and arrange targeted staff training.

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Though many school systems were flush with federal stimulus money, they faced practical constraints on its use. One superintendent admitted, "We thought we'd have a lot more professional development capacity than we have. We didn't have enough substitutes. People are covering all the time. They're exhausted. Like, professional development is one of the big things that suffered this year. And so we couldn't really roll [a new program] out because we just didn't have a fair way to, you know, support teachers to effectively implement them."

Moreover, a year of covering for absent colleagues made it harder for central office officials, teachers, and school leaders to engage in creative thinking about new instruction. Explained the chief of schools in another urban system:

> *"[Teachers] have no time to plan for instruction because you're always covering. You can't focus on it because the environment and the absenteeism don't allow you to. So when you go home, you're exhausted. Then it becomes this cycle of "Susie" takes off, "Bill" and "Jennifer" have to cover for "Susie." "Susie" comes back, "Bill" and "Jennifer" are exhausted, so now they're taking off. So the principal is trying to hold all of this together so their kids can be in school. I think some people are just unwilling to focus and, you know, the pandemic takes priority. And then there are others who are trying to focus, but it's so hard because the dynamics and the building are pulling you away from what you truly want to focus on."*

Lack of data on individual students

Districts also faced gaps in their student data systems. Instruction that focuses on academic acceleration depends on timely and clear evidence about what students know and can do. Yet, as we noted in our previous report, most of the district leaders with whom we spoke had little confidence in the prior (2019-20) round of standardized interim assessments (e.g., MAP/STARR) or state-mandated tests. Participation had been spotty, and those students who did complete tests often took them at home; the lack of supervision, district leaders worried, may have compromised the validity of student scores.

Working within this void, some of the districts in our sample relied heavily on their own internal assessments. One district credited high achievement in Algebra 1 and third grade reading performance to its regular internal testing of students and its systematic review of those scores in school-based learning communities. Yet not all districts experienced such successes. One district had to postpone an ambitious plan to develop and pilot new math assessments due to staffing shortages that distracted central office personnel and forced them to focus on more immediate needs.

Another district leader, relying on external partners to ramp up high-dosage tutoring, struggled with the variability of data that each company provided: "Every vendor has been reporting data in a different way. And it really drives me crazy…right now we're just getting data all over the place: attendance data and exit ticket data and all that kind of stuff." The lack of consistent data made it very difficult for the district to determine whether any of the tutoring initiatives had improved student learning–and if so, which contracted tutoring company was most effective.

Moreover, in-house measures did not always predict end-of-year scores. In several districts, students did worse on end-of-course tests than predicted by districts' shorter-term measures; in other cases they did better. Explained one system leader, "Our math scores in primary were lower than what we anticipated and lower than our reading scores, which was kind of a shocker

because all the indications through the year was that it was going to be the other way around. So that is what's keeping me up at night right now, trying to figure out what are we going to do about this?"

Districts work to recruit and retain staff

As many said in different ways, 2021-22 was the hardest year yet in a string of exceptionally difficult years. Yet our interviews reveal system leaders simultaneously managing the crises and working on implementing demanding visions for the future. District leaders are determined not only to fill immediate vacancies but also to rebuild teacher pipelines, retain their best teachers, and improve instructional capacity district-wide.

Using short- and long-term strategies

In the face of staffing vacancies, districts not only took stopgap measures (e.g., offering or increasing signing bonuses; and hiring external providers to offer virtual instruction in hard-to-staff subjects), but also sought to build the teacher pipeline for years to come through university partnerships that supported paraprofessional-to-teacher programs and alternative certification for midlife career changers. Several districts, moreover, focused on building the "internal pipeline" by promoting the profession to students. Explained the human resource director, "If we don't, from a career standpoint, get to our high school students and share why they should consider this teaching profession, then we're going to blow it…We can't rely on colleges and universities." By embedding elements of teacher training within a new career education initiative, she hoped not only to boost student engagement but to increase the supply of teachers over the long term.

One district human resources director put it:

> *"It's really easy, especially post-pandemic or whatever phase we're in now, to be caught up in what's right in front of us. And I just really believe that it's both/and. We have to fill classrooms every single day. I start at five-thirty or six o'clock every morning. How many [teaching positions] are unfilled? Where are they and how are we going to rob Peter to pay Paul, to get things moved around so that we can get through the day? That's a reality. And by eight o'clock, nine o'clock in the morning, that's done and we've still got plenty of time to focus on. Okay, what's gonna be our long-term approach [to building our human capital reserve]? [How] are we gonna do this?"*

In this district, the planning for the "long-term" approach meant thinking beyond today's classroom vacancies to forecast hiring needs multiple years in the future. The human resource director explained, "I'm looking at some timelines in my office right now, and I can see what I'm gonna need in terms of dual language Spanish in '25-26, what I'm gonna need in Vietnamese in '24-25, you know, and I…think about the commitment that this district has to dual language programming…to then backward map what our staffing needs are gonna be."

District leaders were also aware of the strains on their incumbent principals and teachers and worked hard to retain them. Explained one chief of schools, "The struggle of motivating my team has been very hard when they wanna give up, and I'm like, please don't give up, just stay with me." To build forward momentum in the context of capacity constraints necessitated both intense focus and a willingness to confront tradeoffs.

For one district leader, pressing forward amid staff exhaustion required a concerted effort to narrow priorities: "We had to be very realistic about what's important and what's high-leverage."

Supporting principals

To reduce the burden on principals, this district substituted virtual meetings for face-to-face gatherings. The district also kept its instructional priorities more tightly focused. To do so, it limited adding professional development initiatives as the school year progressed. The district leader explained, "If we did have to put something new on the table, why? Is it going to help us with school? Is it helping us with the day-to-day? If it's not impacting the day-to-day, if it's not going to increase attendance, if it's not going to improve the way in which we deliver instruction, then we're not doing it."

The talent director in a different district echoed this point. "Our leaders [seemed overwhelmed]. They're telling us, 'There's so many priorities, there's so many needs. I feel myself getting closer and closer to burnout. You know, I just don't know if I am gonna be able to continue doing this for another year or another couple of years.' And so, we were really intentional about engaging our campus leaders, hearing what they had to say, particularly around wanting more focus and narrowing of priorities." This strategy appeared to pay off, as the same leader noted that their principal retention rate exceeded that of neighboring districts.

Shifting schedules and responsibilities

Some districts altered schedules to alleviate stress on staff members. One district expanded Thanksgiving break to a full week and increased its allocation of "wellness days." Explained the superintendent, "We try to be a little bit more thoughtful with time so people could have more time." Another school district shifted the responsibility for reviewing federal disability law compliance from assistant principals to leaders in central office, so the administrators could spend more time addressing internal school issues.

District leaders reported readjusting their progress timelines to focus their teams on intermediary goals and explore alternative measures of success. One district, which had traditionally focused almost exclusively on end-of-year test results, shifted its attention to monthly targets and check-ins in an effort to sustain momentum for improvement and allow teachers to "feel some micro successes along the way." Explained one senior leader, "I think we've been pretty one-dimensional in our thinking about success being an 'A-rated' [highly graded] district…No one wants to be a non-rated district, who wants that? But we do have to recognize that we're in a really tough jam."

Another urban district also tried to motivate incumbent teachers by working with "change" vanguards in the schools on a new "vision for learning in a post-pandemic world." As one senior leader explained, "Last week [we rolled out our] goals and vision for the next three years, the strategies that we think are going to help get there. [My focus] has been to help leaders understand that they can still do these things despite the firefighting that they're doing through Covid-19...and a lot of schools did that anyway throughout the year."

Training their eye on a vision for the long term bolstered the morale of staff at all levels. The senior leader said, "The most brilliant thing [that the superintendent did] was giving us a chance to do something new and different. So at the same time where we're dealing with all those huge problems that are bogging us down, that are making our lives miserable every single day, we are doing all these wonderful and exciting things that keep you kind of energized and really looking forward."

Focusing on classroom instruction

Mixing old and new instructional strategies

While no districts in our study had adopted all elements of an "accelerated learning" approach, leaders in every system discussed instructional approaches they had developed to motivate and help students. In some cases these strategies were new, direct responses to remote learning and the challenges of the pandemic, such as a perception that remote learning had led teachers to dominate the time, which allowed students to become passive learners and not challenged to apply what they had learned. Some districts turned to "tried and true" strategies that focused on regular classroom instruction initiatives that had been put on hold during the pandemic, not individualized responses to learning loss.

For several districts in our study, the most important instructional adjustment was a return to high-quality, face-to-face instruction. For one district, this meant codifying a framework for "deeply and highly engaging learning." In another, this meant contracting with external coaches to help teachers provide "first-time, strong instruction" based on "the nitty-gritty of how kids learn math and what are the things they just have to know." That same district had, in the 2021-22 school year, partnered with an external provider to coach teachers in language arts instruction that emphasized student-driven work. District leaders said this partnership helped increase student achievement overall and close achievement gaps across schools.

While far from revolutionary, district leaders saw these back-to-basics approaches as a critical corrective to help guide teachers who had grown accustomed to remote, teacher-centered instruction over Zoom. For example, several district leaders emphasized the need for teachers to create more opportunities for students to struggle independently with academic concepts and give them a chance to fall short (so that they could rebound and learn).

Other districts pointed to initiatives directly tied to problems that had surfaced during the pandemic. For example, one district, promoting the use of project-based learning in all grades, hoped to challenge students to grapple with complex real-world problems tied to core academic subjects and present their findings at a public demonstration of learning. Leaders credited this approach with helping students catch up on basic skills while moving forward with grade-level content. Another pointed to "universal design for learning," which combines the work of teachers, in-school specialists, community groups, and parents to meet individual students' needs. Several districts began re-thinking career education to better align with adult work and community needs.

Supporting teachers while pressing ahead

Districts continued to struggle to find a balance between minimizing stress on exhausted teachers and expecting them to do more. One district encouraged, but did not require, teachers to adopt some of its signature innovations, labeling them "safe practice" (exempt from review on high-stakes teacher evaluations) in order to encourage educators to step out of their comfort zone. The chief academic officer reported, "We started mini-projects, something that would last like a week or two weeks...[and] a lot of people started going out there and saying, 'okay, I'm gonna give this a try.'" By the end of the year, she noted, schools that had long resisted innovation adopted a range of new strategies. "It's like the whole school is on fire. Today, they had a 'demonstration of learning.' Every single grade level was doing something amazing." For this senior leader, the voluntary nature of the instructional reforms was central to their success. "When you tell people that they have to do whatever, and everybody needs to do X, that's when we have found a lot more resistance versus...Giving people...permission to try something else to engage the kids in a different way."

Personalized tutoring

Beyond adjustments to classroom practice, several districts invested in tutoring programs to personalize instruction and meet the specific needs of students who had fallen behind during the pandemic. Tutoring approaches varied both in scope and schedule, with some districts developing district-wide programs for individualized instruction during the school day and others letting schools make their own decisions about tutoring, which often occurred outside regular hours.

High-dosage tutoring was a central element of one district's academic recovery strategy. This district envisioned a school day structure with embedded individual or small-group instruction and worked with staff across schools to offer tutoring time during class (rather than a separate class period). By shifting the schedule and hiring full-time, in-person tutors, the district's tutoring director sought to better link tutors with regular classroom teachers. The hope was to promote a culture shift in which group instruction in the classroom and individualized tutoring were closely linked and mutually reinforcing.

Ed tech skepticism

Several years of remote learning, which demanded continual innovation, left some districts skeptical about "new and shiny" educational tools, especially those that relied heavily on instructional technology. "I think we're going to have a slow breakup with some of our ed tech tools," explained one district leader. "I know a lot of people like them because they are 'one-to-one.' But there's just a lot of noise in the ed tech space. And knowing what actually works and doesn't, it's just not clear."

Districts largely characterized technology-based methods as emergency responses to stark staffing shortfalls in subjects like foreign language and math. They considered the results to be mixed. Describing one set-up that paired a certificated teacher who taught over Zoom with an in-person paraprofessional who managed the class, a superintendent said: "Despite these teachers' best efforts to build connections with kids, [it] is a very weird way to engage kids, when you are on screen and they're physically together in the room. And the kids themselves told us they didn't like it." The district might continue the practice into the 2022-23 school year, but only because of labor shortages. "Some schools might need to have, you know, a Spanish teacher that way. Okay. But definitely not [in] a core content area."

In sum, our conversations revealed that all districts have been adapting their instructional strategies in response to the pandemic. Some of these adaptations can best be characterized as works-in-progress. Leaders point to these initiatives as opportunities for learning–it will take more time to know if they effectively boosted achievement or improved other measures of student success.

The pandemic changed district roles and structures

Predictions that the pandemic would utterly transform school districts may have been premature, but the protracted emergency led these districts to adapt in key ways: seeking out better data about students, classrooms and community priorities, and re-thinking traditional decision-making structures.

Better data of all kinds

Looking ahead to the 2022-23 school year, district leaders were intent on learning and building on the results of state-required achievement tests, which most states administer in spring. They also were eager to avoid the test score surprises that several experienced in spring 2022. Noted one leader, "One of the things we have to look at [is] our internal assessments and how we're assessing kids to make sure that our assessments are matching what we want the outcomes to be...I need to make sure that we're teaching basic math down in the primary schools and for whatever reason, well, for lots of reasons, those scores did not match what we anticipated."

At least one district was working to improve its internal data collection capacity, developing a uniform "dipstick" tool that classroom observers could use to assess implementation of instructional innovations and student response. Explained the chief academic officer, "Part of [the task] is, how do we know that our schools are in pursuit of a more just, fair, and good system of education? And part of that is...are the students involved in complex tasks, is the learning joyful and adventurous?" By systematically–and qualitatively–assessing what was happening in classrooms, the district sought to gauge the extent to which often-complex instructional initiatives had taken hold in classrooms as a precursor to evaluating their effectiveness.

Similarly, this district invested in budget tracking systems. By linking budgetary requests to specific district goals and then tracking the actual use of those funds, senior leaders sought to track implementation better and thus lay the groundwork to measure the efficacy of specific programmatic interventions.

Districts also invested in parent and stakeholder surveys and reached out more consistently to principals to gauge school-level climate and morale. One district ran parent focus groups and interviewed prospective families to understand their priorities. Explained the superintendent, "We realiz[ed] some of the things that we thought were the most important were not the most important to our families."

Given concerns raised in other reports about parent disengagement and student disinterest in the wake of Covid-19, the proactive outreach reported by three of the districts we interviewed may be an important resource for getting students to attend school more consistently and work harder to master and use what they are taught.

There is also some evidence that proactive communication with parents helped buffer district leaders from political blowback. As one chief academic officer in a district prone to high-stakes battles over curriculum explained, "[Because] the first steps toward the future were envisioned by our community and [because] we kept transparently showing the community the strides on the work they wanted us to do," district leaders managed to avoid the most disruptive political battles. "So, while we definitely have had lots of community drama and lots of politics this school year, we have never lost the focus on teaching and learning."

Increased collaboration to address complex problems

The pandemic forced superintendents and key central office leaders out of their usual lanes and into new forms of collaboration that fostered learning. It also led to new divisions of responsibility and freedom of action for individual schools.

Leaders in every district we interviewed volunteered at least one example of inter-agency collaboration that had emerged as a result of the pandemic. During the past two years, district leaders often found themselves serving as "jacks of all trades" working together on problems outside their traditional purview. Many district leaders saw major benefits. For example, serving as the "principal of record" in an understaffed high school led to a new understanding

of managing classrooms every day. And collaborating with senior leaders in other divisions reduced turf battles between those divisions and increased officials' capacity to understand and address complex problems.

Explained one chief academic officer, "We have become so much more interdependent as a cabinet than we [were]. I connect with 'Bill' every morning and every afternoon around subs and which teachers are in each building and which teaching and learning specialist do we need to be out. That is a new practice. I connect with 'Julie' around Covid[-19] numbers…[and] I hear from principals around safety plans and the need to have coverage for care rooms or isolation rooms."

Beyond crisis-induced "job sharing," school districts rethought their organizational structures. Notably, several districts in our study had effectively combined their "schools division" with their "curriculum and instruction division" in an effort to reduce the gap between design and implementation. Instead of a separate chief academic officer and chief of schools, for example, they hired a single lead official with responsibility for both. This merger was not always easy. One such lead official noted that focusing on both curriculum/instruction and schools "is hard because those are two different types of brains, in terms of what they prioritize and think is most important. It is very easy for the 'school team' to go off and do things and not have a clear line of sight centrally in terms of either the supports or the intentions behind things." Yet by breaking down what many saw as an artificial division between the development of instructional initiatives and the oversight of their implementation in schools, the official hoped to see greater programmatic success.

Districts also rethought the roles of school leadership and the central office. Starting with the need to monitor Covid-19 exposures and risks citywide, feed hungry families, and prepare materials for online learning, district central offices took on many additional responsibilities early in the pandemic. Explained one superintendent, "There was a significant period of time where I had to, out of necessity, recentralize a lot of what we had decentralized [left to the discretion of school leaders] because everything was so unstable that somebody had to be responsible."

Other districts pointed to uniform curricular choices or instructional approaches as a way to reduce long-standing inequities and help students recover lost learning. Noted one district leader, "We had these issues before Covid[-19]. What Covid[-19] did was magnify them and put them under the microscope where we could really see them clearly." The superintendent in another district, expressing concern about cross-school disparities, noted that shifts in decision-making authority were part of the solution. "[Part] of our five-year plan is to think about the role of the network, the role of 'center,' like what are the rights? What are the things that we decide?" For this historically decentralized school district, centralizing some operations–though not all–seemed a critical step in promoting greater equity within the system.

Yet, the pandemic also made it clear that schools each have their own challenges, especially in attracting students back to school and addressing learning losses. One superintendent acknowledged the need to navigate a "hard balance," seeking to restore school autonomy "with guardrails." A senior leader in the same district concurred, noting that while autonomy "is kind of a draw for teachers" and principals, "you can't just have it be a free-for-all."

In some cases, superintendents sought to create this balance by meeting regularly with principals in order to keep up with challenges and opportunities confronting different schools. In others, district leaders consciously pushed key decisions back down to the schools. One district asked schools to make their own decisions about how to invest federal stimulus funds. In this context, strategies to address learning loss –whether through tutoring, Saturday school, or another approach–varied by school. Explained the chief academic officer:

> *"I think it's real easy to sit back and wait for the district alone to say 'Here is the silver bullet for you to solve this problem.' When in reality, the kids, the teachers in the building every day in that community, need to have some skin in the game. So by telling principals, you've gotta develop a plan for what this looks like specific to your group of students means they've looked at student data, they know where their students are."*

In this case, the push toward school-level problem-solving came after a concerted pandemic-era effort to centralize operations. For the superintendent at least, the tension between these two imperatives was a key feature of their success. She said, "If we hadn't had an infrastructure that was clear on what we were gonna teach and how we know kids are learning, it would really have just gone absolutely all over the place over the past two years...Teachers *did* have to iterate and innovate and think of new and different ways and have a level of digital comfort." But, she added, "Shared outcome expectations [and a common instructional approach], believe it or not, amplified the best of both worlds during the pandemic."

As several of our superintendents made clear, the pandemic intensified the perennial tension between centralization and school-level problem solving. Central offices have indispensable roles to play both in emergencies and in promoting equitable outcomes, but schools need to be free to adapt to the needs of their students and the capacities of their teachers.

Conclusion

All district leaders agreed with one superintendent's comment that "learning recovery is going to be a long one." Moreover, as we spoke in spring 2022, it was clear that the work had only begun.

As we detailed in our "Whack-a-Mole" report, during the first half of the 2021-22 school year, district leaders had been consumed by public health crises, political firestorms, and staffing shortages. Six months later, these problems had not disappeared.

Progress has been slower than the rapid recovery timeline anticipated by optimistic advocates of the "acceleration" approach whom we interviewed in 2021. Following a year of crisis management and institutional adjustments, district leaders know that many students remain far behind. District leaders are still trying to figure out how to help children make up pandemic-caused learning losses.

Our interviews reveal that superintendents and their senior staff members have moved beyond mainly "firefighting" and are now increasingly working on a second track as well: advancing their educational visions for the future. Some are returning to aspirational visions of "the good school" based on plans developed before the pandemic, when learning loss was not such a pressing problem, while others have experimented with a mix of familiar and novel approaches. Even before the pandemic, such visions were hard to put into practice. Ongoing crises and district and teacher capacity limits could continue to complicate their implementation, just as they slowed acceleration efforts.

Even as districts extend their recovery timelines in the face of unprecedented challenges, it is not clear how patient students and families–or the public at large–will be. In the coming months, we might see the first signs of answers to vital questions like:

- Will families become impatient with the slow recovery and leave for neighboring districts and charter schools, private schools, or homeschooling, causing enrollment declines that will further undermine school systems' capacity to rebuild?
- Will districts be able to speed up their work so that below grade-level students make more sizable gains and those in the upper grades graduate with the skills and capacities they need for college or careers?
- Will labor market pressures ease, allowing school districts to keep, find, and develop the people they need to complete the complex work ahead?
- Will districts continue to improve instruction and strengthen schools, or will continued disruption and educator exhaustion lead to a loss of urgency, resignation, and lowered academic standards?

Policy implications

Our findings have important implications for policy at the district, state and federal levels.

At the federal level, policymakers can respond to continued labor market challenges and the delayed start to many instructional reforms by extending the time frame for using federal Covid-19 relief funds, which were originally scheduled to expire in January 2023. While numerous media accounts have bemoaned the pandemic money that school districts have seemingly left on the table, our interviews suggest that leaders are determined to tap into those resources—but sometimes have been hamstrung by structural factors outside their control, such as tight labor markets and the staffing problems of finding appropriately qualified consultants and contractors. Moreover, districts that have only begun to move out of crisis mode would benefit from additional time to review internal data to refine their investment plans so that they focus on ambitious—but also achievable- programs to truly accelerate student learning.

States should provide districts more guidance and oversight on high-quality curricular materials, linked professional development, tutoring vendors and programs, and additional support to help recruit and retain high-quality teachers. States also have an important role to play in

helping districts test and adopt more innovative instructional approaches and school models that go beyond what many school districts are currently trying. CRPE offers a more detailed prescription of some promising strategies in our just-released report on the state of U.S. schools.

School districts and systems need to be nimble in maintaining instructional and structural reforms in the face of continuing challenges. We urge them to double down on their efforts to collect data and evaluate and finetune their own initiatives. Though no one should expect districts to catch up all students in a single year, the depth of learning loss across ages, regions, and demographics makes it critical that districts assess their own progress frequently and make changes, even ones that educators find difficult. Continuing to try new approaches like team teaching and tapping into community partnerships may help overcome some of the challenges districts are facing. So would a return to the earlier emphasis on academic acceleration and personalized instruction through high-dosage tutoring and extended schooling, especially for those students who have lost the most learning time.

Philanthropies and other partner organizations can play critical roles in improving teacher pre- and in-service training. They can also support districts in trying new methods and removing policies and contract provisions that freeze schools in place. Districts will not be able to do this work alone. Several districts in our study highlighted how they had worked with external partners to strengthen instruction through professional development and coaching. One district has gone a step further, introducing data systems that link programmatic interventions with student learning objectives in order to figure out which ones pay off. As districts seek to be more nimble and responsive, external partners may help them and others develop and manage better systems to assess students' growth, using those systems to identify and expand on-the-ground strategies that help students catch up.

It remains to be seen whether the initiatives detailed in this report will be fully implemented—or even sufficient to help all students catch up. Policymakers and the public must pay attention to evidence about which students are and are not catching up; every year we need rigorous new studies to identify students still suffering from learning losses. As we have seen, district leaders are willing to work 24/7 and intend to help students regain lost ground, but to date district efforts have not been nearly enough to overcome pandemic-era learning losses.

One district leader expressed the most concern for older students, who have far less time to capture missed knowledge and skills before graduation compared to their younger counterparts.

"It's not just test score data," the leader said. "It's what I hear students saying. They don't feel prepared. I think we are not talking enough about [what] our older kids have lost out and the lack of preparation they feel for the work that they're doing right now."

Acknowledgments

We could not have written this report without the time and candor of the ASDP system leaders who spoke with us, generously giving their time and attention during this challenging school year. We would also like to thank the several reviewers who all helped sharpen the report's findings and conclusions. This report is made possible by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Foundation. While this report draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.

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